NEW

JAPANESE
MYTHS & MONSTERS

DISCOVER THE CURIOUS CRITTERS AND VENGEFUL SPIRITS OF JAPAN

Digital Edition

FUTURE

FIRST EDITION

WELCOME

THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN HAS A RICH MYTHOLOGICAL HERITAGE FILLED WITH TALES OF GODS, HEROES, SPIRITS, DEMONS AND MONSTERS. FROM THE COUNTLESS NUMBER OF SHINTO DEITIES KNOWN AS KAMI TO THE NUMEROUS SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES FOUND IN FOLKLORE, SUCH AS THE ENIGMATIC YŌKAI AND GHASTLY YŪREI, DISCOVER HOW THIS EASTERN LAND REMAINS FERTILE SOIL FOR STORYTELLING. JAPAN INTRODUCED THE WORLD TO NOT ONLY LEGENDS OF YORE, BUT MANY MODERN MYTHS AND MONSTERS – SUCH AS THE MIGHTY SAMURAI, THE FORMIDABLE NINJA, THE HORRIFYING KAIJU AND THE EVER-COMPELLING SHAPESHIFTING POKÉMON – THAT HAVE SHAPED GLOBAL CONTEMPORARY POP-CULTURE.

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THE MYTHS & MONSTERS OF THE LAND OF THE RISING SUN

VENTURE BEYOND THE OUTER LAYERS OF MODERN JAPAN INTO A TIMELESS WORLD OF ANCIENT BELIEFS, FASCINATING FOLKLORE AND WEIRD AND WONDERFUL CREATURES

WRITTEN BY **PHILIP S KAY**

With its futuristic capital city and state-of-the-art technology, at first glance Japan may seem like a country ahead of time. However, behind its modern mask and pristine visage hides a more ancient and mystical land – a curious place created by a fusion of history and legends. This world of myth and folklore is the abode of a bewildering assortment of unique deities, strange creatures and other supernatural entities. As those brave souls who dare to enter will find out, there can be a fine line between gods and monsters in Japan.

AN ANCIENT LAND

The archaeological and cultural record of Japan dates back thousands of years, but unlike other civilisations of similar antiquity that we can track through the millennia, the myriad islands that make up the Japanese archipelago have remained comparatively free of foreign interference. Apart from a brief period following the end of World War II (1945-52), Japan has never been occupied by another power, and although influenced to some degree by the cultures it has come into contact with, many of the customs, beliefs and traditions of the present stretch all the way back to the civilisation's enigmatic origins.

Japanese mythology owes a great deal to the country's geography and geology. Situated on the Pacific Ring of Fire, three-quarters of the volcanic nation is made up of mountainous terrain, with its loftiest peaks reaching more than 3,000 metres (9,840 feet) into the sky. Its interior is covered in dense, peaceful forests that seem charged with spiritual energy, and a spectacular coastline conceals mysterious coves and caves that offer perfect sanctuaries for reclusive gods and goddesses.

Within such inspiring environments, isolated communities forged relationships with the outstanding natural features of their local areas and developed stories imbued with the mystery and magic they attributed to them. Over time, oral storytelling traditions ensured that these were passed down over successive generations until they became inseparable from historical reality. Some would eventually form the foundations of the nation's mythical origin narrative, which was chronicled in two key 8th-century compilations. *Kojiki* (712) and *Nihon Shoki* (720) are beguiling literary records that combine history, legend and folklore. They detail the creation of Japan, recount the adventures of its Shinto deities and legitimise the divine lineage of the nation's imperial family.

THE WAY OF THE GODS

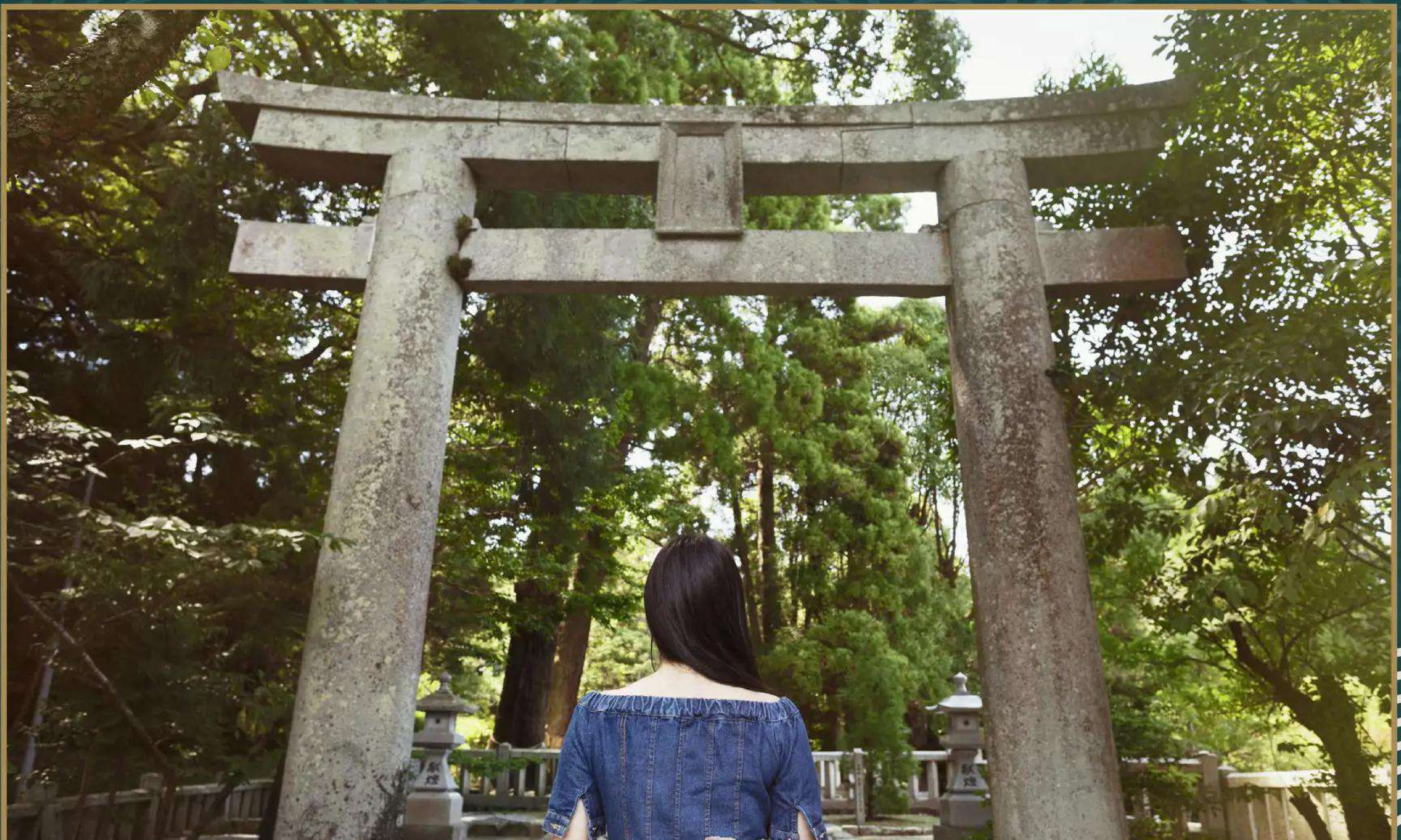
Shinto, meaning 'the way of the gods' or 'the way of the spirits', is Japan's indigenous belief system. Worship is intrinsically linked to the country's natural environment because followers believe that remarkable phenomena – such as ancient trees, giant boulders and fiery volcanoes – are inhabited by deities or spiritual beings called kami. Although these

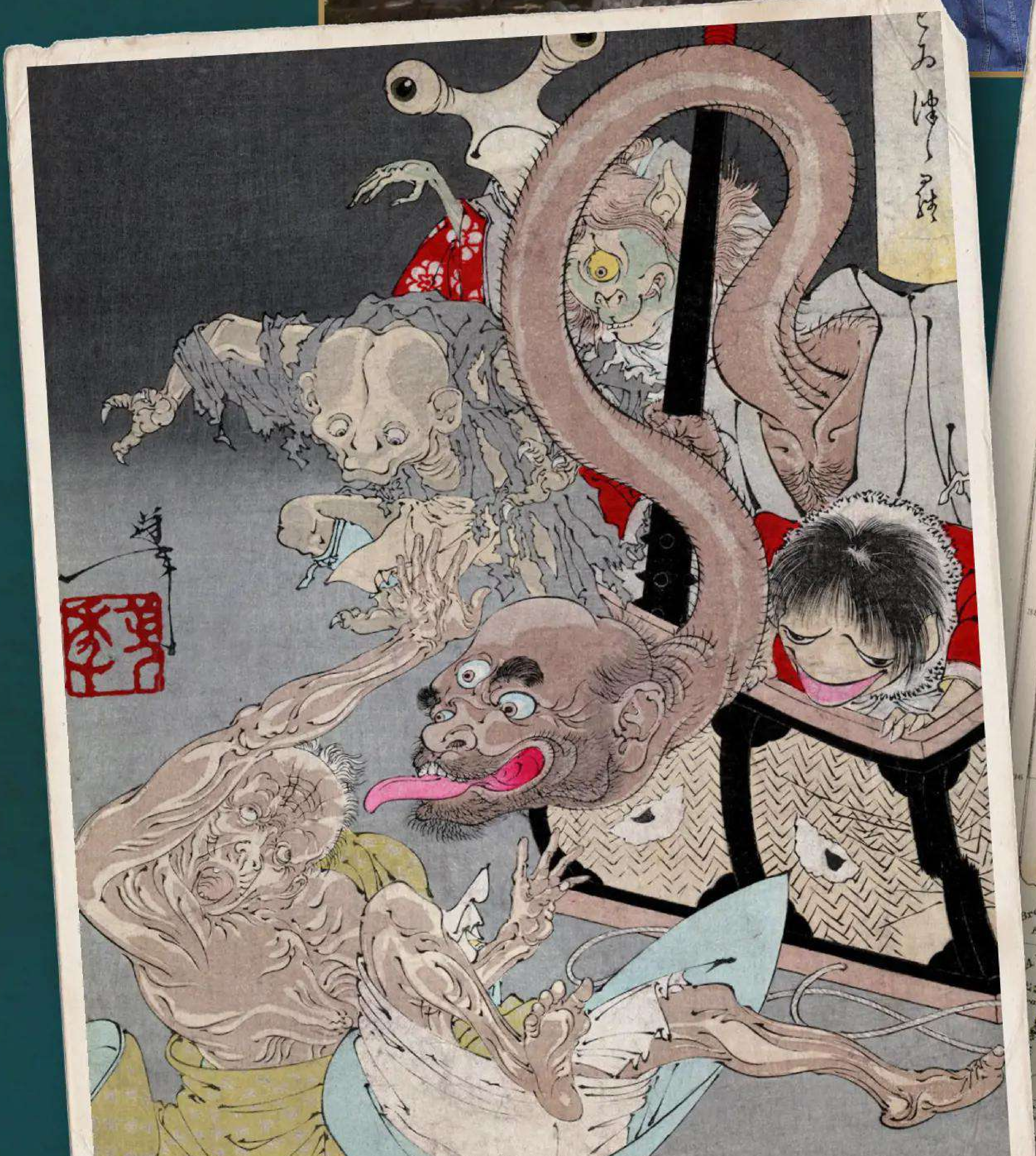
> "BEHIND ITS MODERN MASK HIDES A MORE ANCIENT AND MYSTICAL LAND"

RIGHT Torii gates found at Shinto shrines mark the boundary between the normal world and the sacred, spiritual realm of the kami

BELOW Japan's strange world of mythology and folklore contains a fascinating and often frightening collection of spirits, apparitions and monstrous creatures

BELOW RIGHT The Japanese archipelago is made up of thousands of islands, including the large landmasses of Hokkaido, Honshu, Shikoku and Kyushu, which constitute the mainland





JAPAN
Gulf of Tartary
SAGHALIEN
LA PEROUSE STR.
OKHOTSK SEA
TSUGARU STR.
SEA OF JAPAN
COREA
Provinces
Geographical Miles. 60 = 1 degree
Japanese Ri. 28·3 = 1 degree
English Statute Miles. 69·16 = 1 degree

entities exist throughout the country, it is the most southerly of Japan's main islands (Kyushu) that has the strongest connection to the creation mythology of the ancient texts. People who travel there today can still visit the sacred cave from which Shinto's most venerated kami – the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami – emerged to bring light to the world, as well as the coastal shrine of the god Ugayafukiaezu no Mikoto, who fathered the country's first emperor.

The enormous number of kami that make up the Shinto spiritual universe have a wide range of characteristics. This vast diversity is conducive to accepting and incorporating the deities, philosophies and traditions of other cultures and religions into Japan's mythological world. Buddhism and Confucianism had already entered the country via China and Korea before *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki* were completed, and they influenced both the texts and society at large. Elements of Daoism also made their mark on Japan, becoming apparent in astrological divination techniques and the duties of magic practitioners who could offer protection from harmful forces.

CONTINUED EVOLUTION

As the centuries passed, Japan's mythical realm of gods, goddesses and spirits continued to evolve and expand to include various other entities. The popularity of folk stories, now referred to as mukashi-banashi (tales of long ago), led to it becoming colonised with increasingly strange beings and lore. Sometimes likened to Western fairy tales, the encounters described in many of these are unsettling and involve supernatural apparitions with malevolent intentions or monstrous animal-humanoid hybrids with terrifying appearances. Different regions had their own mukashi-banashi, and while some have survived to the present day, others were lost or forgotten over time.

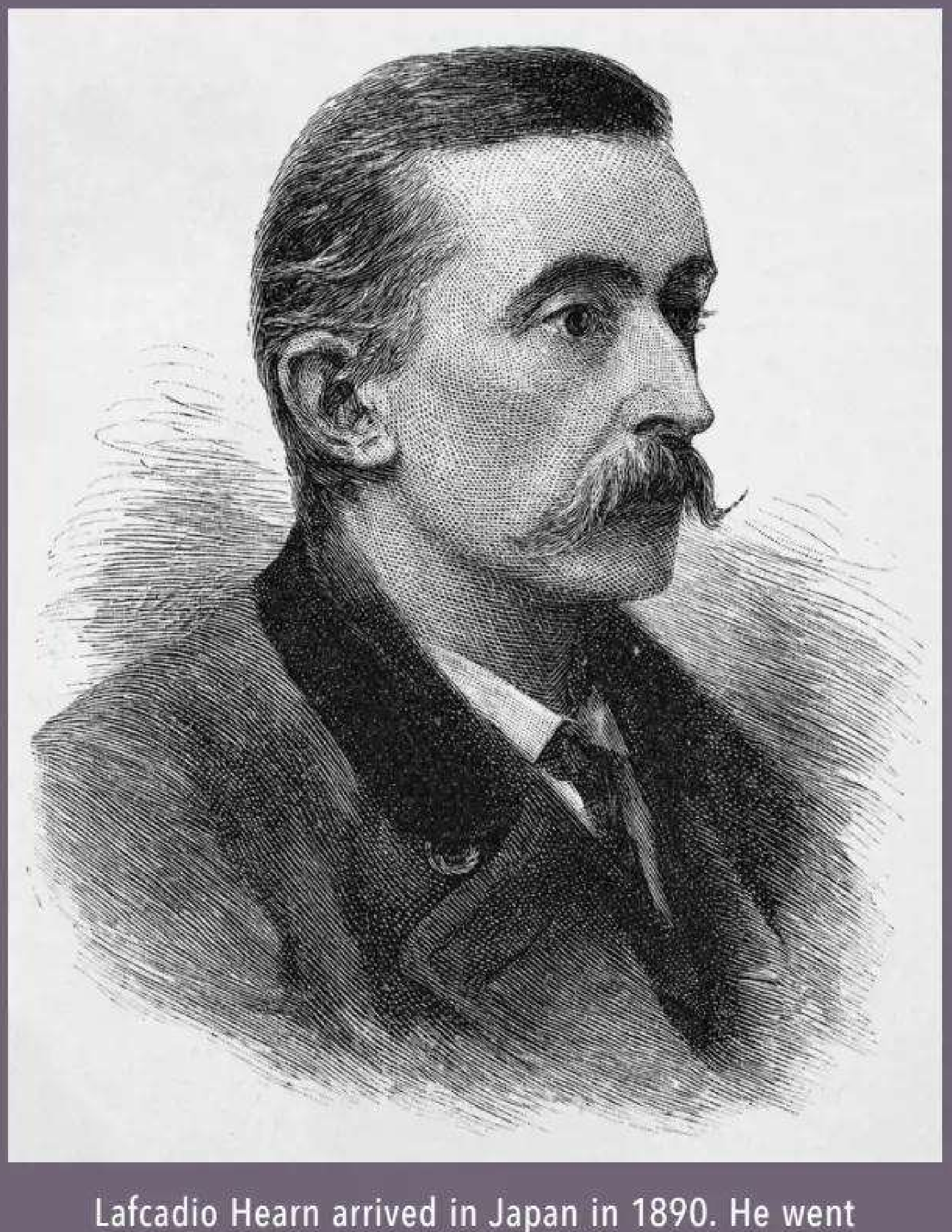
Japanese scholar Yanagita Kunio (1875-1962) was instrumental in preserving many of the tales for future generations to enjoy. His interest in folk traditions led him to study them, and he wrote several books about the old stories. His most well-known work is *Tono Monogatari* (The Legends of Tono), a collection based on the local legends and superstitious beliefs of the inhabitants of a rural town in Honshu's Iwate Prefecture. In *Tono Monogatari* you can learn about the bizarre, river-based Kappa and the mischievous Zashiki-warashi, a spirit that ensures prosperity for the family home.

Another person who helped to conserve the traditional stories of Japan's past – and was responsible for introducing them to the West – was the writer Lafcadio Hearn (1850-1904). Hearn, who entered the country in 1890, was charmed by the evocative world of 'old Japan'

LAFCADIO HEARN

MEET THE MAN WHO INTRODUCED MYTHICAL JAPAN TO THE WEST

Lafcadio Hearn was a journalist who settled in Japan when the culture of the insular, isolated island nation was largely unknown to the West. During the 14 years he lived, studied and worked there, he wrote a series of informative essays and books about traditional aspects of the country. Hearn's early life had included many hardships, but he found his place among the old stories and customs of Japan. He met his wife, Koizumi Setsuko, in Matsue and later took her surname as his own. They had four children together.



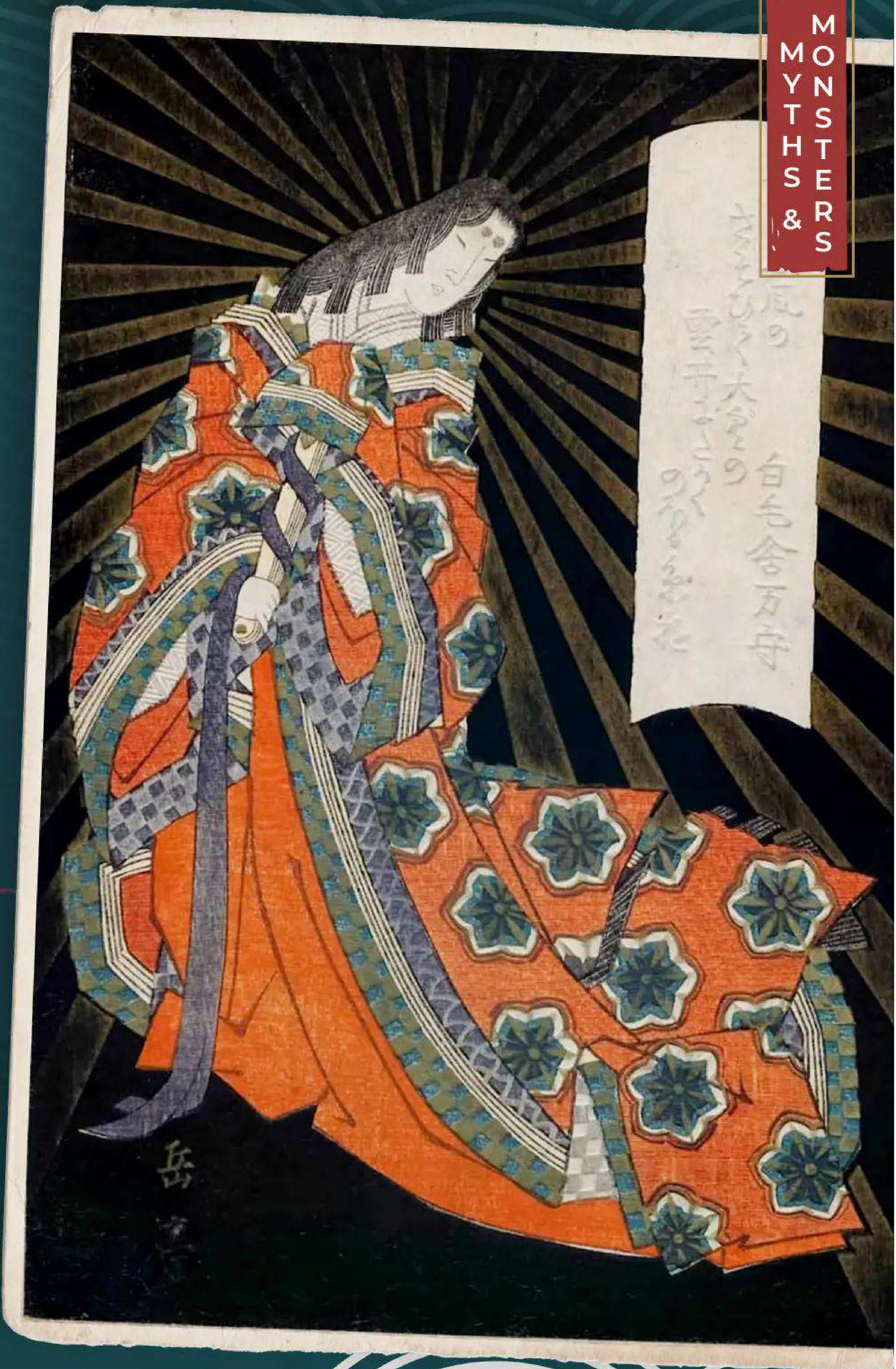
Lafcadio Hearn arrived in Japan in 1890. He went on to become a Japanese citizen and adopted the Japanese name, Koizumi Yakumo

at a time when the country was racing towards industrialisation. His book, *Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things*, was influenced by older eerie accounts that he came across. The anthology of ghost stories, which includes one about a corpse-eating ghoul, offers an chilling insight into the disturbing side of Japanese folklore.

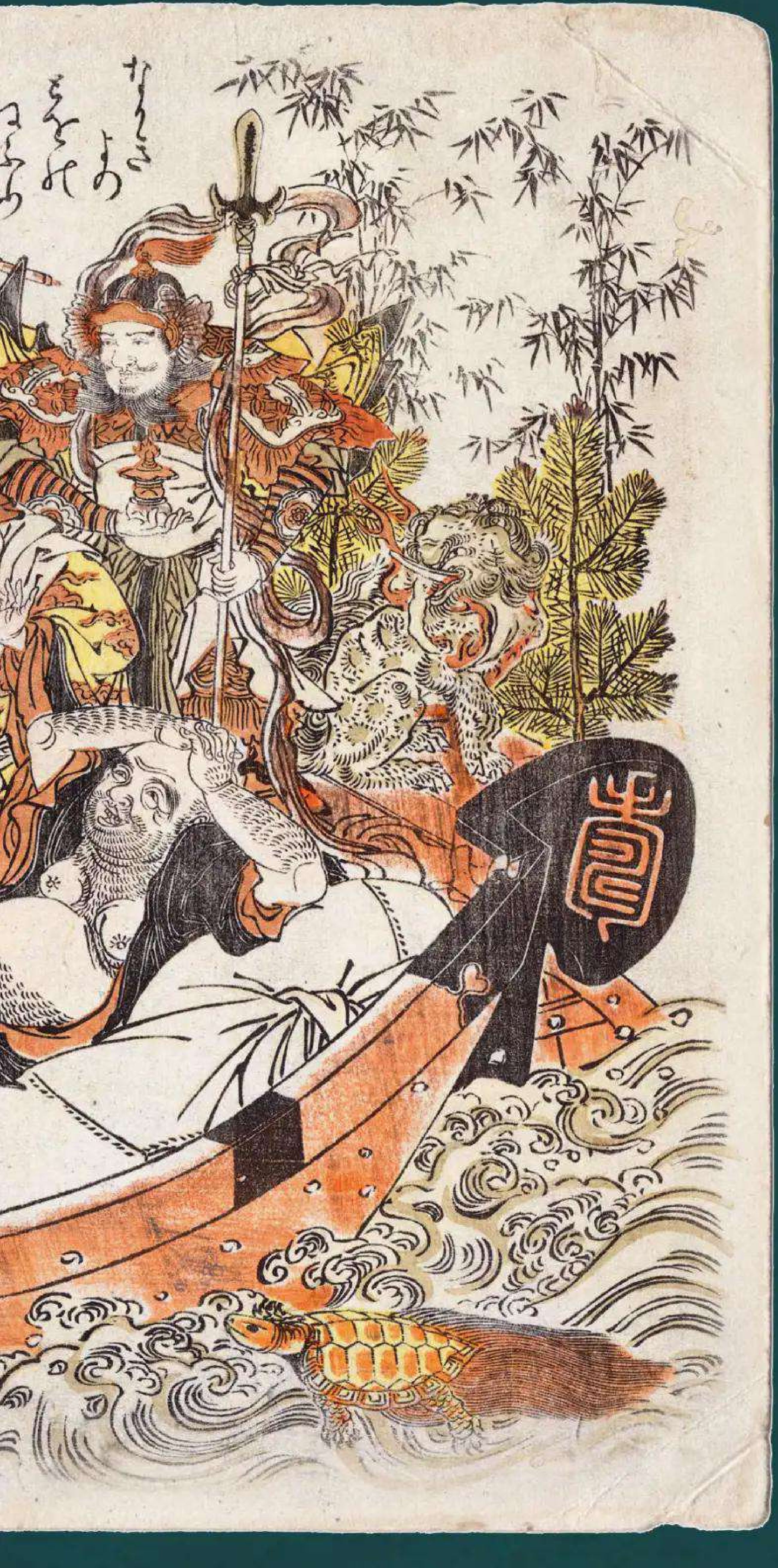
STEP OVER THE THRESHOLD

Since its beginnings, Japan's world of myth and folklore has constantly evolved – from the ancient spirit-deities of Shinto to the haunting Yurei of traditional stories. Even today, there are new additions to the already innumerable gods, goddesses, legendary figures and oddities that inhabit it. You are certain to meet many of them over the following pages, so as you step over the threshold to begin your journey into Japan's realm of mythology and monsters, be careful where you tread, lest you run into an old Yamamba mountain witch or a vengeful samurai ghost.

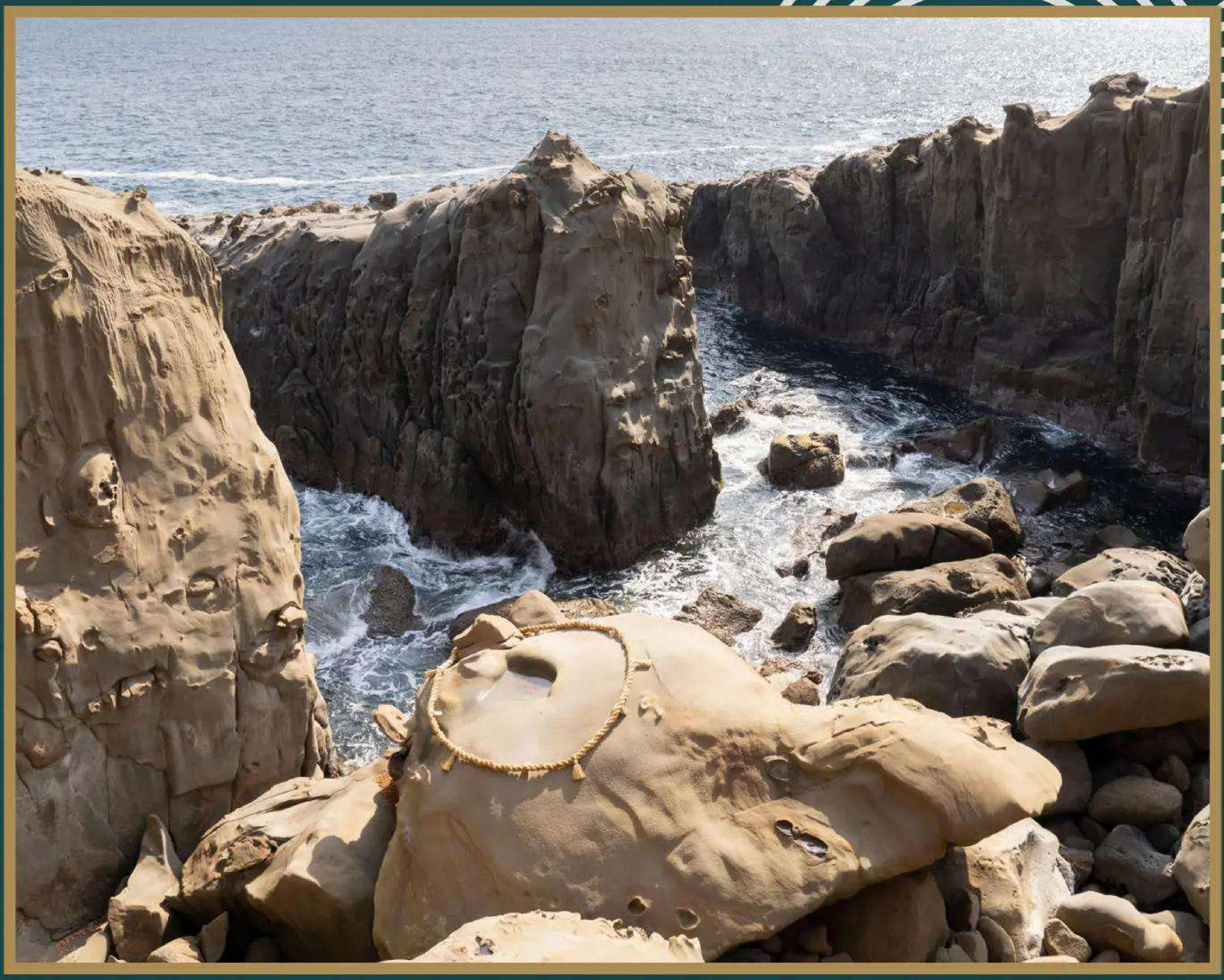
> "AS THE CENTURIES PASSED, JAPAN'S MYTHICAL REALM OF GODS, GODDESSES AND SPIRITS CONTINUED TO EVOLVE AND EXPAND TO INCLUDE OTHER ENTITIES"



RIGHT A woodblock print depicting the sun goddess Amaterasu Omikami. Her legendary story forms a key element of Japanese creation mythology



LEFT The Seven Gods of Fortune in their treasure ship. The majority of this benevolent group had their origins in the belief systems of other cultures



BELOW Some Shinto shrines, such as Udo Jingu in Miyazaki, are set in dramatic locations and are important for their mythological significance and unusual natural features

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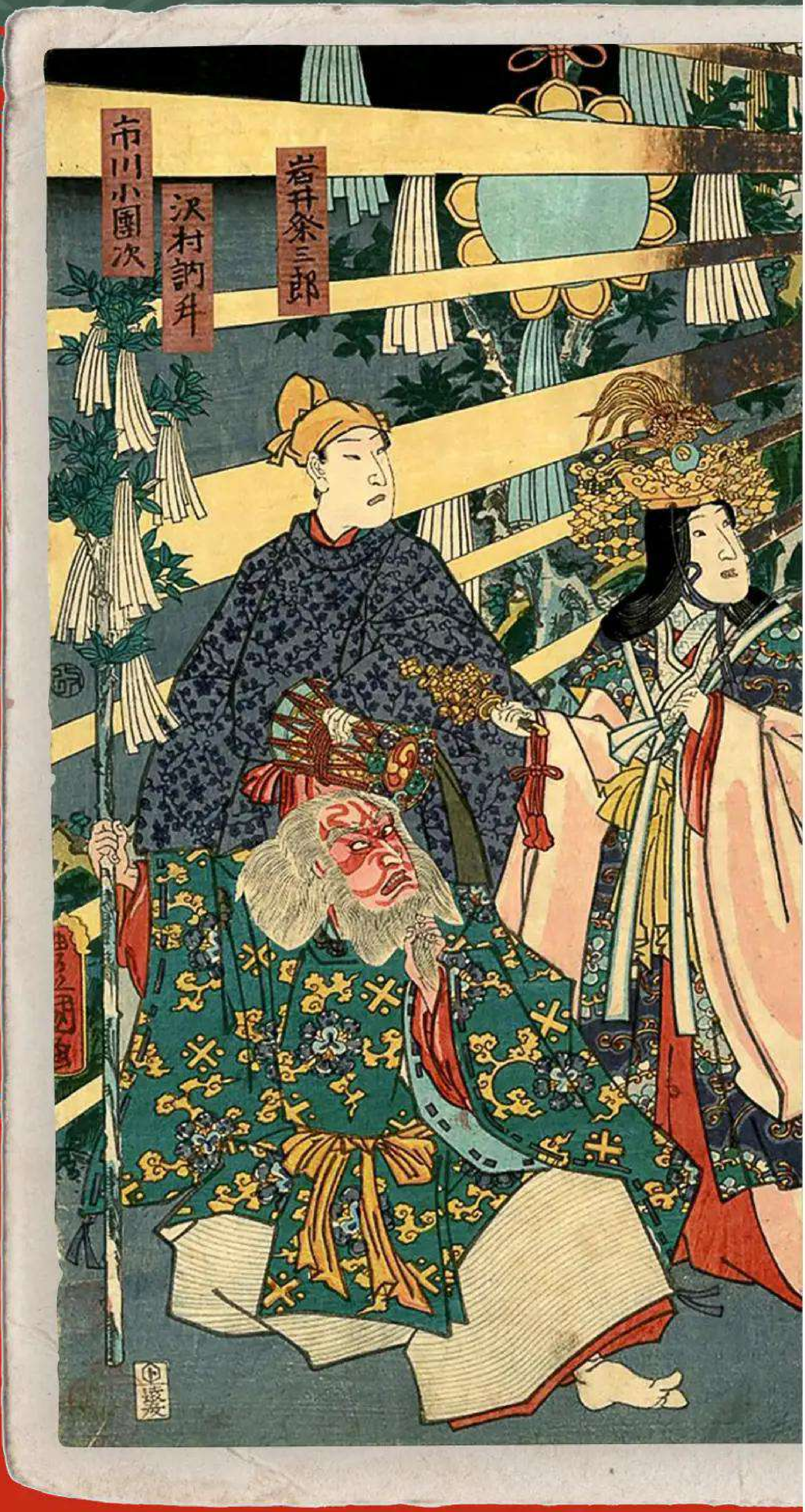
8 MILLION GODS

WHAT ARE THE BEINGS CALLED KAMI, WHAT DO THEY REPRESENT, AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN TO THE PEOPLE OF JAPAN?

WRITTEN BY **AIDEN DALBY**


岩井粂三郎
沢村訥升
市川小團次

MAIN Amaterasu, the goddess of the sun, is one of the three noble children and is said to be the ancestor to Japan's imperial family

RIGHT There can be kami for things such as rivers, mountains and trees in general, as well as kami for individual rivers, mountains and trees

FAR RIGHT The *Kojiki* is one of Japan's oldest surviving texts and tells of how Japan and other realms came to be

Despite the majority of Japanese citizens today describing themselves as non-religious, Shinto is prevalent in the country and its culture. But Shinto is not your typical religion. It is unique in that it doesn't have a founder or prophet, and does not follow any ancient text or act in accordance with any doctrines. What Shinto does do, however, is offer ways for people to show their appreciation for various aspects of life and the world they inhabit.

The word Shinto means 'the way of the gods', and these beings or gods are known as kami. The concept of kami can be hard to explain as there is no concrete definition of what they are, so they are not easy to characterise but in the simplest form, they're anything that can be worshipped. Often, the word 'kami' will be translated to mean 'god', however it would be more accurate to see kami as representing a quality. A kami can represent specific locations, animals and objects or embody them in general. For example, a river may be home to a specific kami, but at the same time it also houses the kami of rivers in general. Which kami is more important is irrelevant – what matters most is people recognising the existence of them. Kami do not have powers, they're not perfect beings and they don't exist in a different world. They are created by the energy of the universe, known as 'musubi' and if treated well will bring prosperity, but if mistreated they can bring bad luck. In Shinto everything is considered a living being, and a kami's energy lies among people and nature, therefore kami are living in everything.

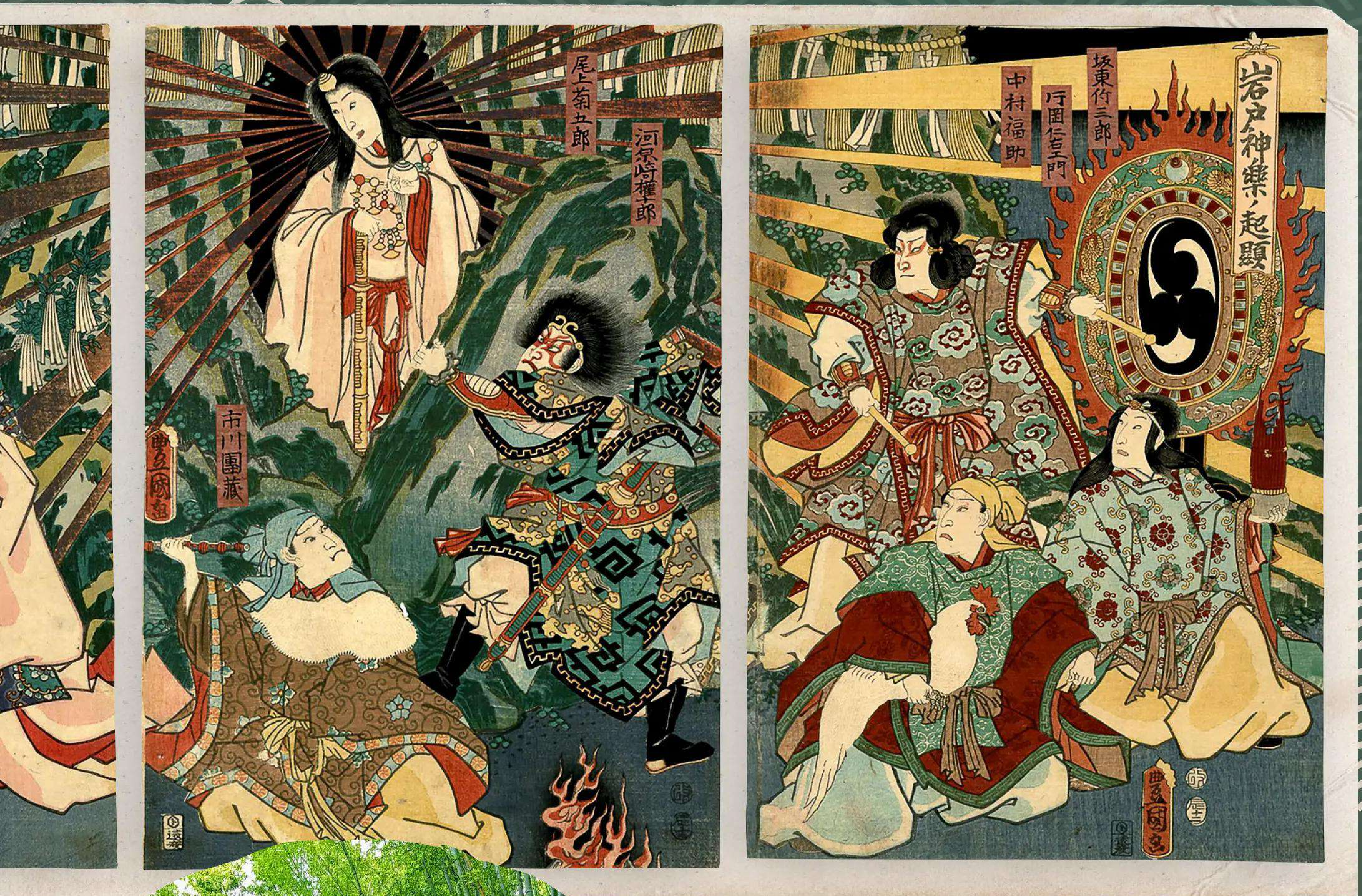
While an object or animal that has existed for a long time may have kami, it may also manifest as a kami. This is known as 'tsukumogami' – an item that has inherited a kami. This is most commonly used to describe a tool, weapon or even household object that has lasted for over a century, and in that time has acquired a certain aura around it. This kami can come about because the tool was cared for and used with love, therefore the object rewards its user by allowing them to wield it and use it well. This can also manifest as a negative thing. If a once-loved object was left in a cupboard for years and was forgotten, that may cause it to inherit a negative kami.

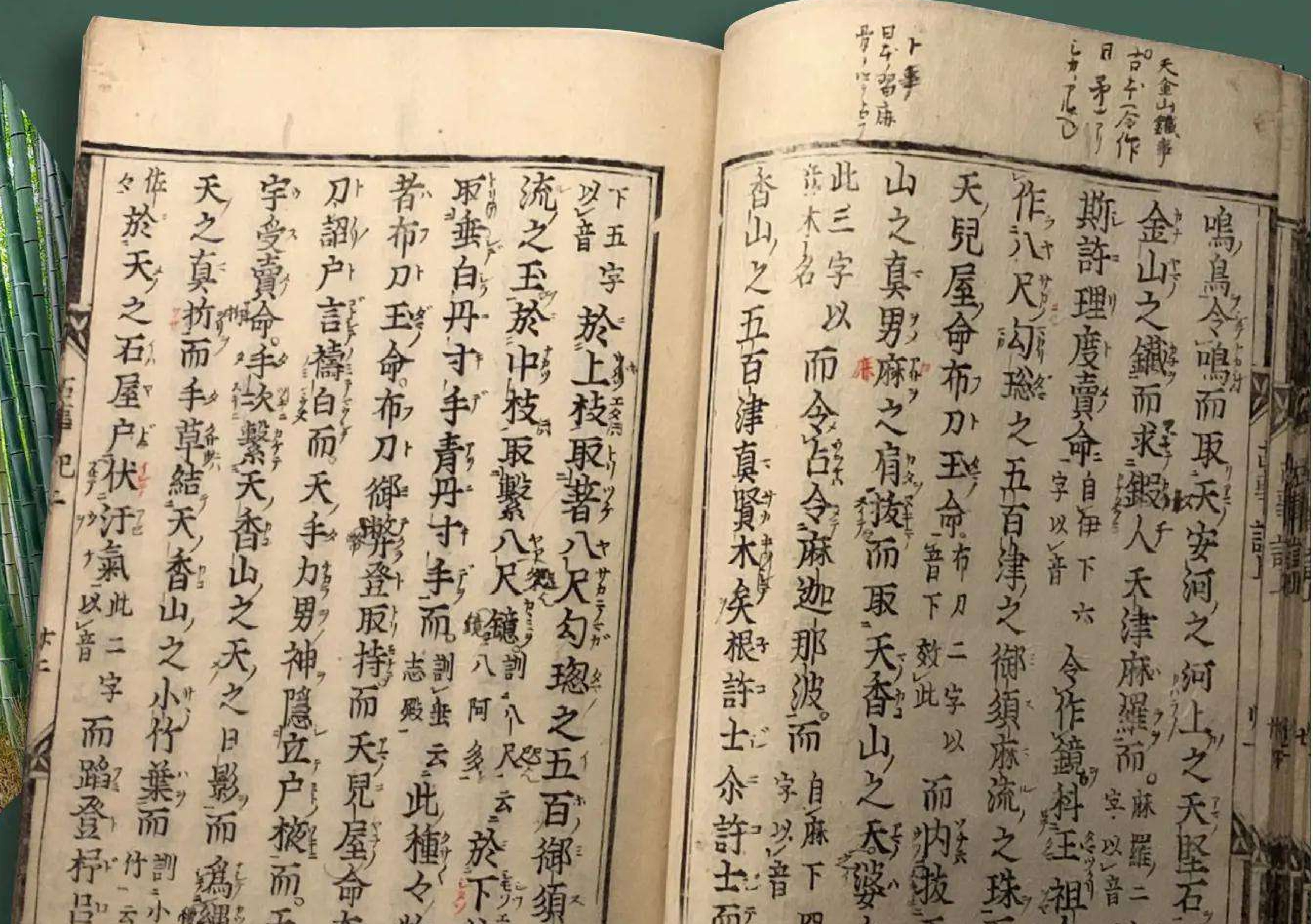
It is estimated that there are over 80,000 Shinto shrines across Japan and these can be identified by the big, red gates known as 'torii' at their entrances. These shrines house kami and people can enter them to show thanks to kami or pray for good fortune.

> "IT IS BELIEVED THAT THE EMPERORS OF JAPAN ARE DESCENDED FROM KAMI AND THAT THEY BECOME ONE AFTER DEATH"

ARE THERE ACTUALLY 8 MILLION GODS?

Kami are typically divided into three categories; Amatsukami, the kami of heaven


尾上菊五郎
河原崎權十郎
市川團蔵
岩戸神樂ノ起顕
坂東竹三郎
片岡仁左衛門
中村福助



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下五字以音）於上枝取著八尺勾璁之五百御須麻流之玉於中枝取繫八尺鏡（訓八尺云八阿多）於下枝取垂白丹寸手青丹寸手而（訓垂云志殿）此種々物者布刀玉命布刀御幣登取持而天兒屋命布刀詔戸言禱白而天手力男神隱立戸掖而天宇受賣命手次繫天香山之天之日影而爲縵天之真折而手草結天香山之小竹葉而（訓小竹云佐々）於天之石屋戸伏汙氣（此二字以音）而蹈登杼呂

OKUNINUSHI

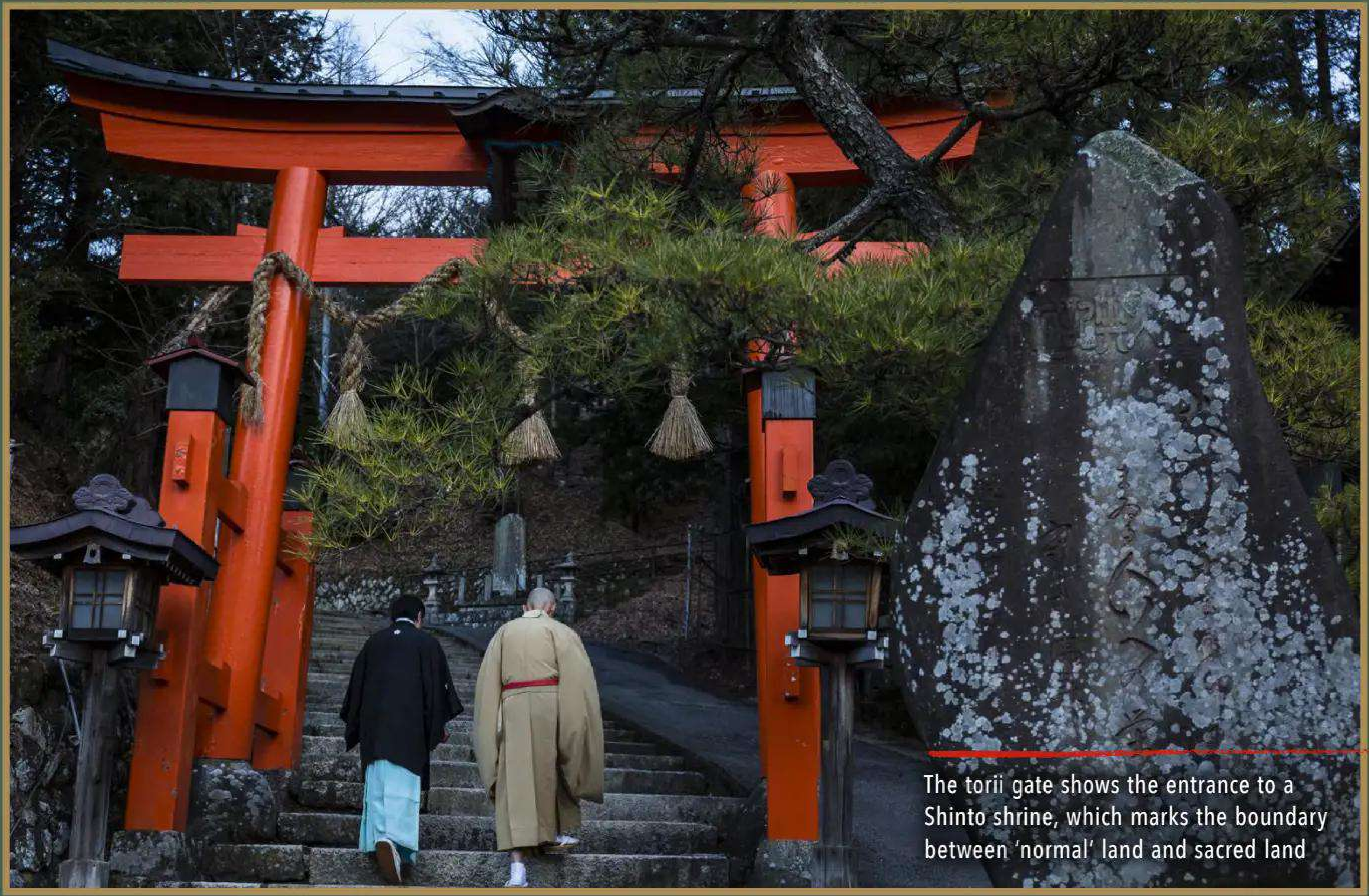
A DEITY, CENTRAL TO JAPAN

In the pantheon of Shinto kunitsukami, Okuninushi may be the closest thing to a central god. He was once the head of the gods of Earth and while he didn't create the Earth, he is considered responsible for shaping it before ruling over the land. Okuninushi would eventually give rule over the land to Amaterasu, who would go on to be ancestor of Japan's imperial family. One of the oldest Shinto shrines, the Izumo-Taisha Grand Shrine in southern Japan, is dedicated to Okuninushi and plays host to many festivals.

世界文化遺産
京都 地主神社
縁むすび…みんなに幸福を与えて下さいます。

Okuninushi is featured in many myths, most famously the White Hare of Inaba

Everyday objects that have been used and cared for are said to house kami, while objects that are mistreated house negative entities



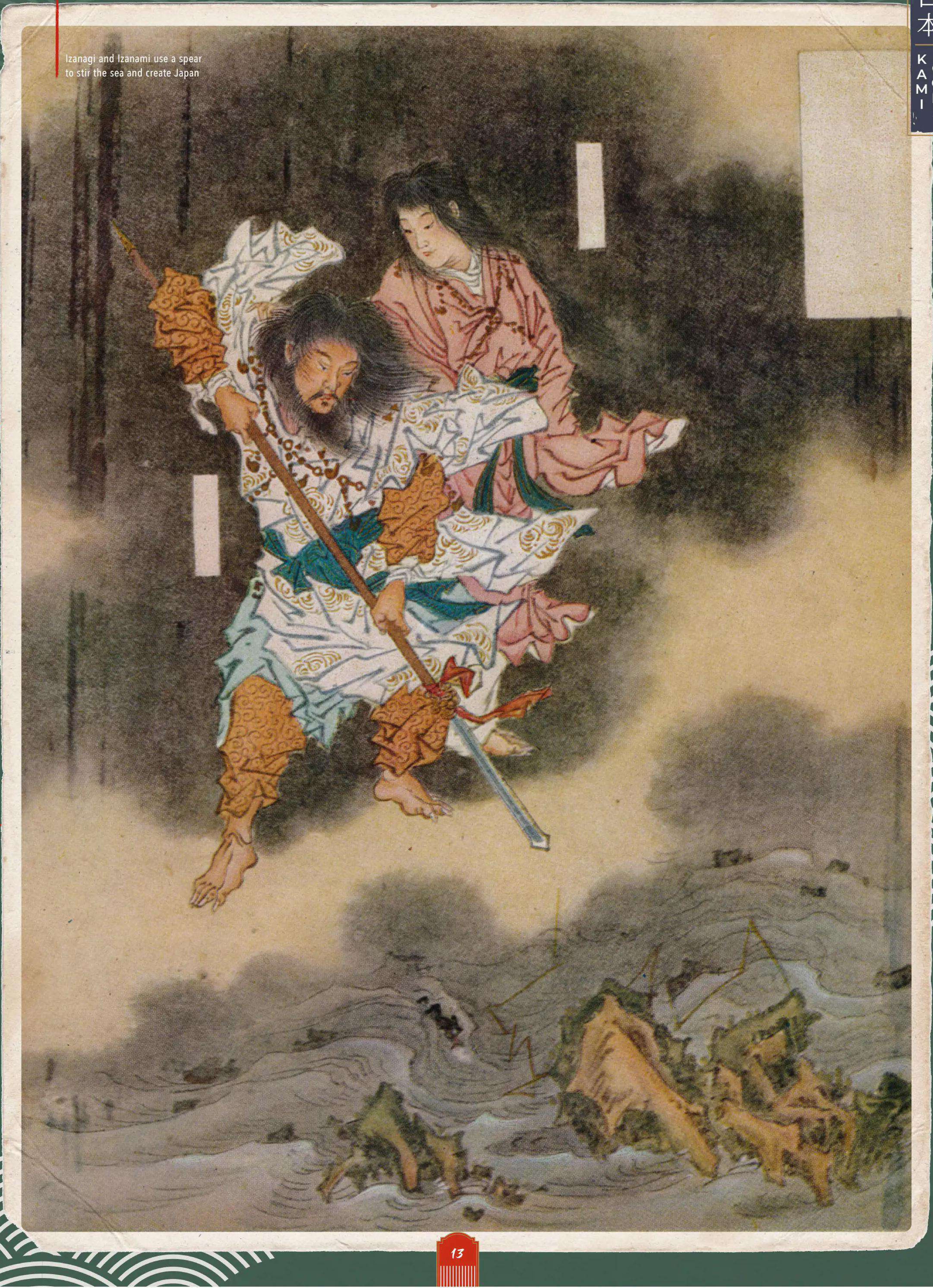
The torii gate shows the entrance to a Shinto shrine, which marks the boundary between 'normal' land and sacred land

that were born when the universe was first created; Kunitsukami, the kami native to Japan before people arrived; and Yaoyorozu no Kami, which are the kami that exist in the world. 'Yaoyorozu no Kami' roughly translates to '8 million gods' but this doesn't refer to the actual number of kami in Shinto religion. Instead, it is more to emphasise the immensity of kami. There could actually be an infinite number of kami, but the number eight is seen as lucky in Japan as the kanji symbol for eight spreads out, symbolising growth. The people of Japan show their respect to these kami by offering food or drink and holding festivals in their honour. Showing them disrespect can invite bad fortune.

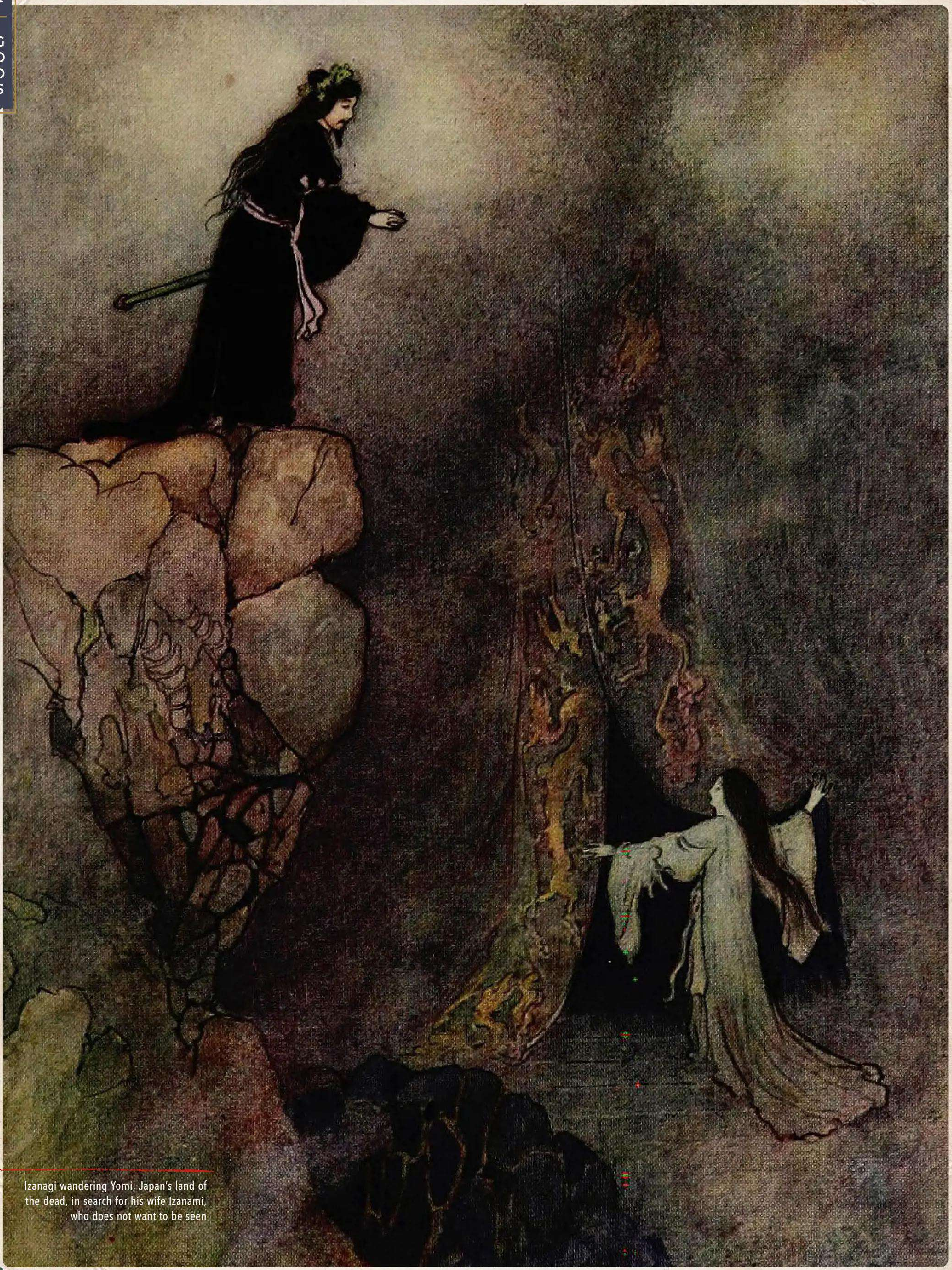
Many of the myths around kami and their origins come from the *Kojiki*, one of Japan's oldest surviving texts that was written around 712. The *Kojiki* is divided into three parts, with the first explaining the creation of the world by the gods of heaven and how the imperial family came to rule Japan. Unfortunately the Japanese Shinto creation myth is confusing and vague but basically, when heaven and Earth was created, the gods also came into existence. Ame-no-Minakanushi, Takami-musubi-no-Kami, and Kamimusubi were the first three gods, created in the beginning without any physical form.

Other generations of gods would appear, and which gods came when is debated as records are unclear. Most accounts seem to concur that there were the gods of heaven – the Amatsukami – who birthed two gods, Izanagi and Izanami, who were called upon to create Japan. The two were given the 'balled spear of heaven' which they used to stir the ocean and when they pulled the spear out, the physical matter that came up became the islands of Japan. Izanagi and Izanami would also go on to marry and have three offspring, Amaterasu, Tsukuyomi and Susanoo, who are known as the 'three noble children'.

Amaterasu, the sun goddess, is said to be the ancestor of Japan's imperial family and one of the rulers of the heavenly realm. It is also believed that the emperors of Japan are descended from kami and that they become one after death. Tsukuyomi is the moon god who rules the night, while Susanoo is the



Izanagi and Izanami use a spear to stir the sea and create Japan



Izanagi wandering Yomi, Japan's land of the dead, in search for his wife Izanami, who does not want to be seen

> "IT IS BELIEVED THAT WHERE YOU GO AFTER DEATH DOESN'T DEPEND ON YOUR ACTIONS – WHETHER YOU WERE GOOD OR BAD – AS EVERYONE GOES TO YOMI"

storm god who represents violent natural forces and controls the oceans.

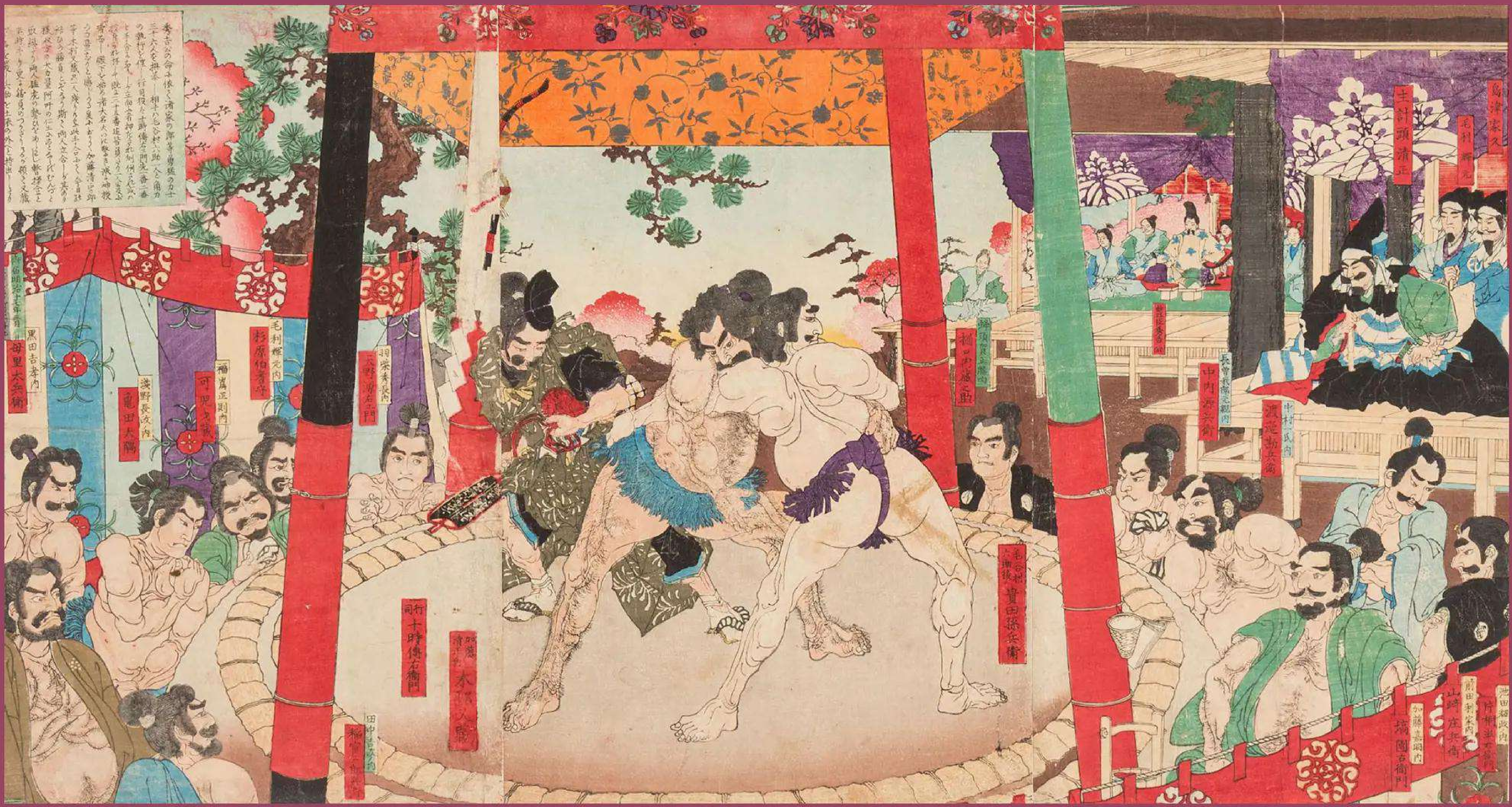
THE MANY REALMS AND YOMI – JAPAN'S AFTERLIFE

In Shinto there are various realms where kami reside as mentioned in the *Kojiki*. The most well-known are the mortal realm, where we live, which is known as Utsushiyo. Takamagahara is where the heavenly gods reside, and Tokoyo no Kuni is the realm where various kami go to live forever. We've mentioned that the spirits of people who pass can become kami, but does Shinto contain an afterlife? Yomi no Kuni, or Yomi as it is simply known, is the Shinto land of the dead. It is believed that where you go after death doesn't depend on your actions - whether you were good or bad - as everyone goes to Yomi. This isn't a paradise like heaven, or a place of punishment - in fact, no clear description of Yomi exists. What the Shinto afterlife is like is only alluded to and it is vaguely described as a dark and sombre place where the deceased wander. As the story goes, Izanami, the creator deity, died giving birth and Izanagi, unable to live without his wife, ventured to Yomi to find her. Izanami hid from her husband and informed him that she could not leave as she had eaten the food of the underworld and Izanagi could stay as long as he promised not to look at her. Izanagi broke his promise and when he gazed at his wife he was stricken by her rotting body. Izanami sent creatures of the underworld to chase Izanagi but he managed to escape and seal off Yomi from the world. In anger, Izanami vowed to take the life of 1,000 people every day. Izanagi, in retaliation, vowed to give life to 1,500 people. The entrance to Yomi is supposedly located in Izumo province, according to *Kojiki*, in what is now known as Shimane Prefecture.

THE FIRST SUMO BOUT

THE ORIGINS OF SUMO ARE LINKED TO KAMI

Sumo, Japan's national sport, has strong ties to Shinto This can be seen in the pre-match rituals, such as the purifying of the ring, and even the referee's robes are not too dissimilar to ones worn by priests. The first mention of sumo dates back to the *Kojiki*. Takemikazuchi, the god of thunder, and Takeminakata, the god of water, would fight over who would control Japan. The two settled the dispute in a hand-to-hand contest, which is said to be the first recorded sumo bout.



The first reference to sumo dates all the way back to 712, where it is mentioned in the *Kojiki*

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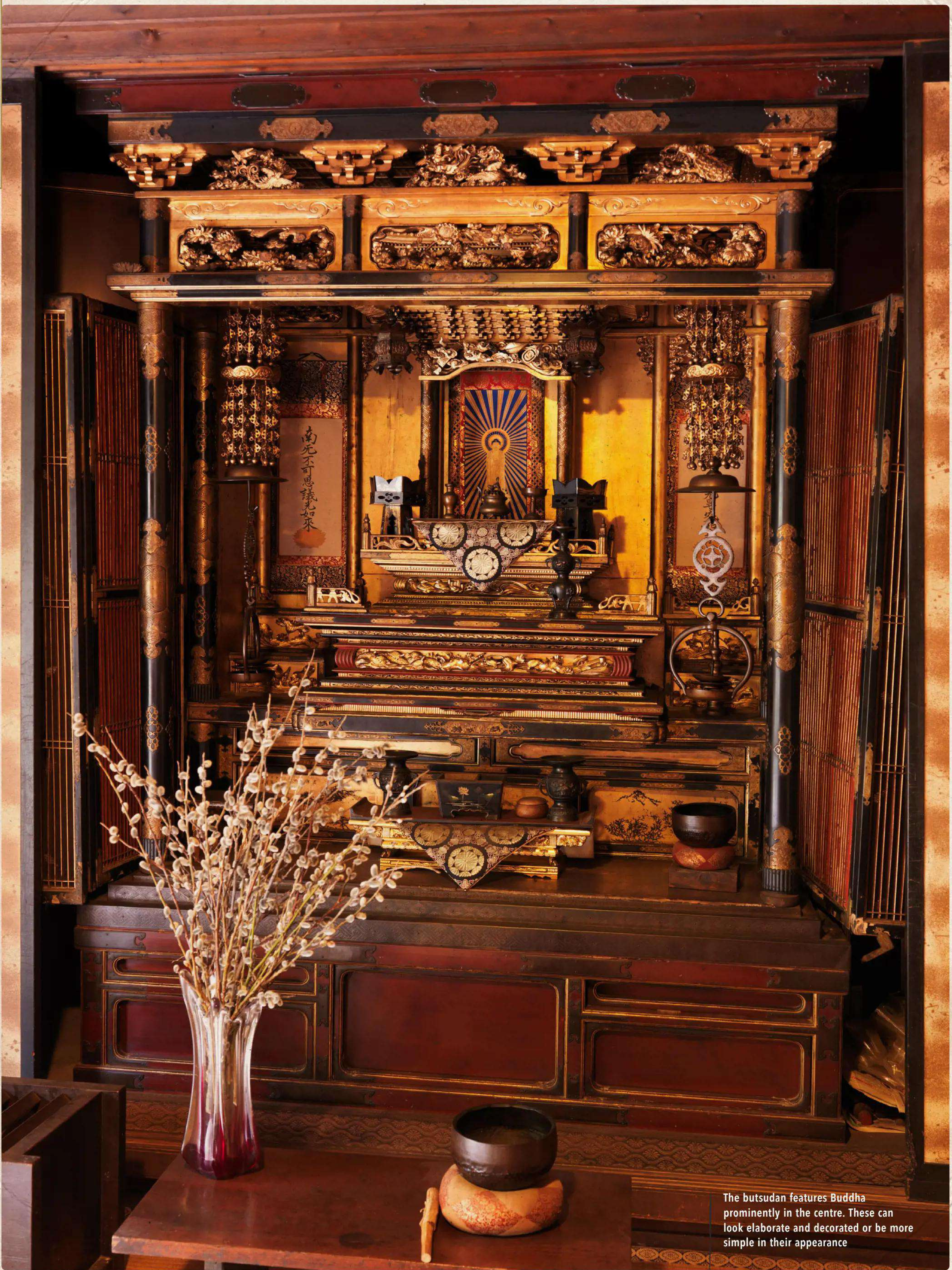


The butsudan features Buddha prominently in the centre. These can look elaborate and decorated or be more simple in their appearance

IMAGES Getty Images; Creative Commons: H yamaguchi, Nesnad

THE HOUSEHOLD KAMI

EACH HOUSE IN JAPAN IS HOME TO ITS OWN DEITY, WITH FAMILIES KEEPING SHRINES TO HONOUR THESE ANCESTORS AS WELL AS OTHER KAMI

WRITTEN BY **AIDEN DALBY**

Despite there being countless shrines across Japan, people's worship doesn't end there. As humans are considered to become kami after death, it is common for there to be gods in each individual household. Because of this, people will set up shrines in their own homes dedicated to these ancestors, or perhaps their more recently deceased family members.

There are two main kinds of shrines; the first being the Shinto kamidana and the other being the Buddhist butsudan. The earliest records of both shrines date back to the 14th century, although it is believed that these existed before then, as there are records from prior centuries of wealthy people having small shrines in their homes. Despite coming from different religions, the purpose of these are the same - to wish the family members well in the afterlife. How these two shrines are used, however, does differ.

THE GOD SHELF

Kamidana refers to a shelf that houses a 'Shintai', an object chosen to house the kami, and to the sides are 'ofuda' - talismans made from paper that offer protection or blessings. The word 'Kamidana' roughly translates to 'god shelf' and these shrines are shaped similarly to a torii gate, like the ones placed at the entrance of public places of worship. These are not only found in homes but also in some martial arts dojos across Japan and there are rules as to where they should be placed. They should always be above eye level and placed somewhere where people can't walk under them. It is also customary to offer small cups of water each day, which are known as mizutama.

> "PEOPLE WILL SET UP SHRINES IN THEIR OWN HOMES DEDICATED TO ANCESTORS"

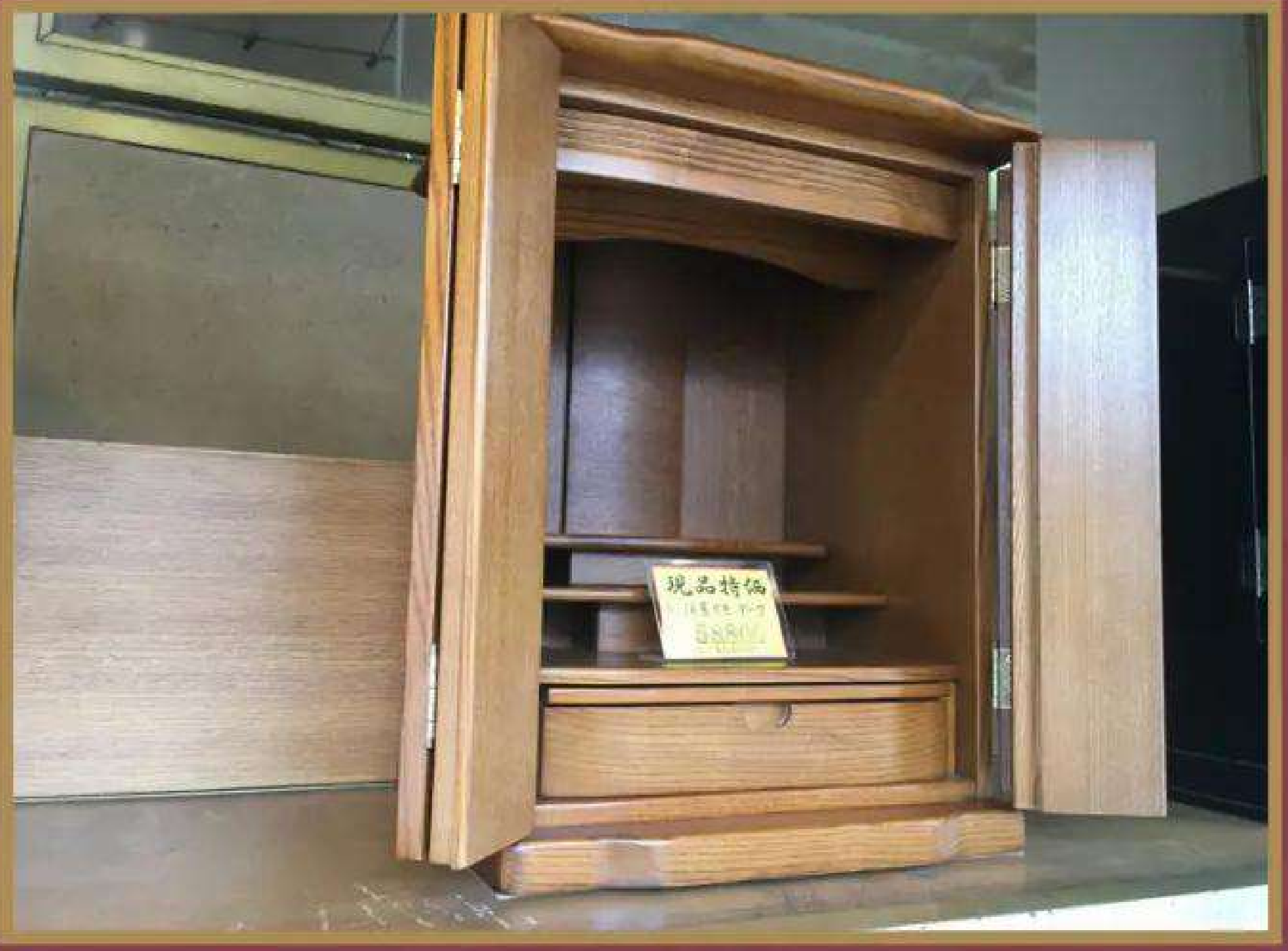
THE BUDDHIST ALTER

The butsudan is unique to Japanese Buddhism and the word translates to 'Buddhist altar'. It is a wooden cabinet with two outward-opening doors and from the outside, they look perfectly normal. However, once opened the inside is far more spectacular, with a representation of Buddha placed high up in the centre, with memorials to family ancestors to the side. Typical offerings to butsudan include incense, flowers, candles and small bits of food and drink. While there are no 'official' rules as to what goes inside a butsudan, people are discouraged from putting in items such as photographs, trophies or ashes, in favour of more traditional items.

HOUSEHOLD SHRINES TODAY

Shrines do more than simply act as a reminder of ancestors and it isn't uncommon to find homes that have both a kamidana as well as a butsudan. What's more, some homes may also have a shelf known as an engidana, which is more for good luck than remembering loved ones. Engidana are to honour deities such as the Seven Gods of Luck. They look like small shrines and within them people house small sculptures or charms as this is believed to bring good fortune.

People in Japan purchase their shrines from Buddhist goods shops, who often sell both Shinto and Buddhist shrines, but like everything today it is possible to buy them online. They come in various designs, ranging from simple to the most elegant and the costs vary accordingly.



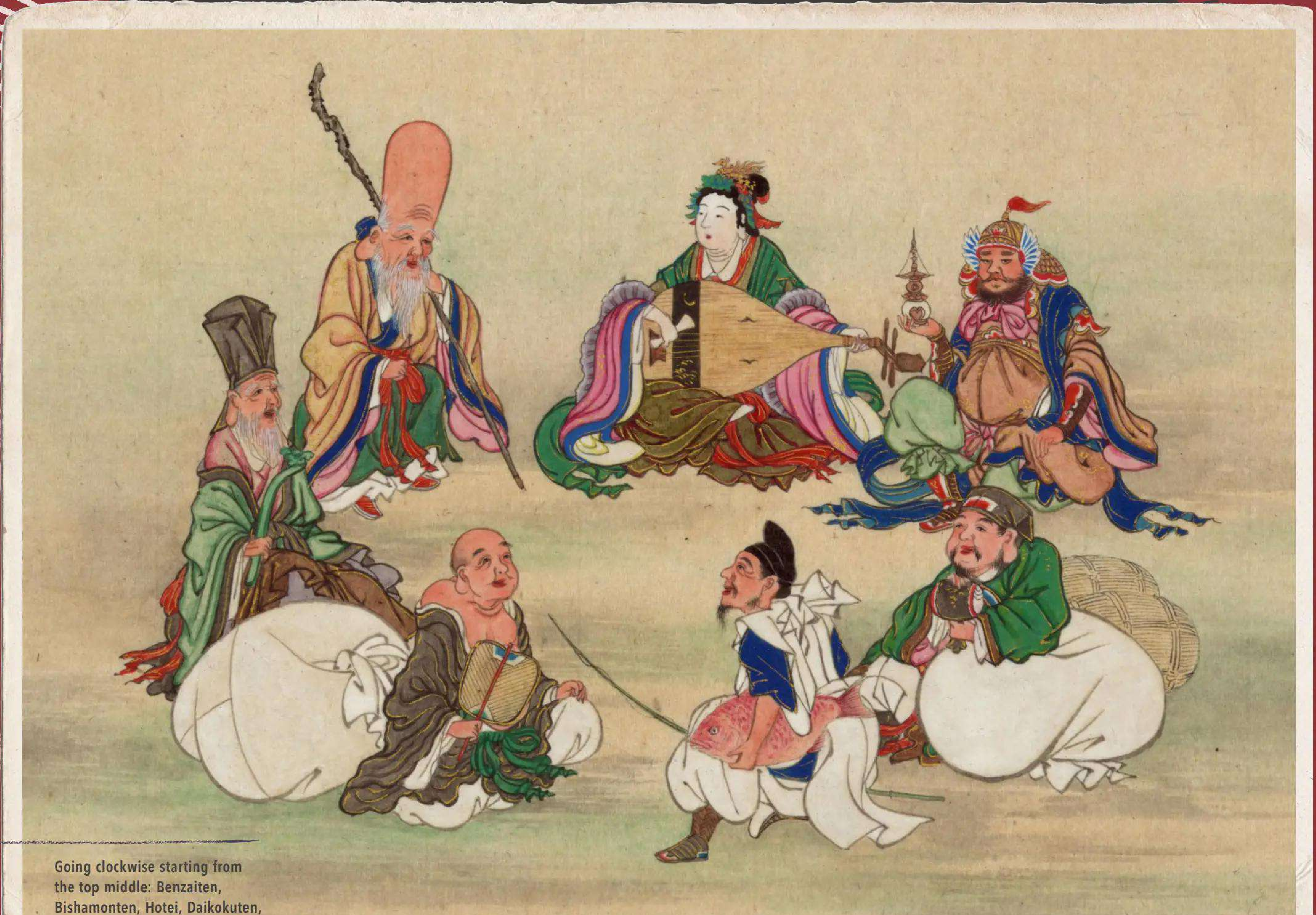
TOP Butsudan come in a wide variety of sizes and styles and are sold in Buddhist goods stores across the country

ABOVE Kamidana not only appear in Japanese homes, but are also displayed in martial arts dojos as a way to enshrine its kami

THE SEVEN GODS OF LUCK

THIS GROUP OF DEITIES BRING VARIOUS ASPECTS OF FORTUNE AND PROSPERITY TO THOSE WHO PRAY FOR THEIR BLESSINGS

WRITTEN BY **AIDEN DALBY**



Going clockwise starting from the top middle: Benzaiten, Bishamonten, Hotei, Daikokuten, Ebisu, Jurojin and Fukurokuju

Staff at a departments store in Tokyo dress up as the Seven Lucky Gods to advertise an in-store promotion

The Seven Gods of Luck, also known as Shichifukujin, have been symbols of prosperity in Japan for over 1,000 years. Each god arrived in Japan as a separate deity – it is not known exactly when, but it is known that they were not associated with each other initially. Then at some stage during the Muromachi period, they were grouped together into a collective. Why the gods were grouped is unknown, but one theory is that it was because these gods relate to wealth or good fortune, and the number seven has always been a sign of luck in Japan. Three of the gods originated in India and another three came from China and were adapted over the years. Which means that out of all of the gods, only one of them is native to Japan.

WHO ARE THE SEVEN GODS?

The Seven Gods of Luck are:

BENZAITEN – Originating from India, her name is often shortened to Benten and she is the patron of high art. The only goddess among the seven, she brings artistic inspiration and fortune to poetry, music, dance and more. She will often be depicted as a noble woman wearing magnificent robes and headdresses.

BISHAMONTEN – A god of war, and protector of Buddhism and holy places. Bishamonten wields a spear that he uses to fend off evil spirits and protect the lawful.

HOTEI – Sometimes called the 'Laughing Buddha', he is often shown with a huge smile and wearing clothes that cannot fit around his bulging belly. Praying to Budai is said to bring happiness and he bestows luck to children.

DAIKOKUTEN – Derived from the Indian god Shiva, Daikokuten is the protector of luck, wealth, farmers and food. He is often illustrated wielding a mallet and seated on bales of rice. Farmers may want to pray to this god if they want a bountiful harvest.

EBISU – The only one of the Seven Lucky Gods that is native to Japan, Ebisu is the patron of fishermen, shown as a short, fat, jolly and lively individual.

FUKUROKUJU – Distinguishable due to his elongated forehead, Fukurokuju is linked to wisdom, longevity and fertility. Artists' impressions of the god regularly have him accompanied by a heron, a symbol of good fortune and long life.

JUROJIN – The god of longevity, he is depicted with a long, white beard, often riding a white deer or walking next to one, drinking wine and carrying a scroll on a staff. The scroll is believed to contain the world's wisdom.

The gods are often depicted in small trinkets and displayed in stores in the hopes of bringing prosperity and good fortune to the business

CELEBRATING THE LUCKY GODS

These gods have been depicted countless times both on their own or as a group. When shown as a group, they're often riding on their treasure ship, called 'Takarabune', which is said to sail through the heavens. Art showing this is most commonly seen around the New Year's celebrations. Trinkets or small statues are purchased and displayed in businesses in the hope of bringing good fortune and prosperity.

During the Muromachi period, the elite would put woodblock print art of the Seven Lucky Gods on their treasure boat under their pillow on the night of 2 January in the hopes of bringing good luck in the new year. As woodblock prints became more affordable in the Edo period, print publishers would sell inexpensive copies that the general public could afford, and so this tradition grew.

> "TRINKETS OR SMALL STATUES ARE DISPLAYED IN BUSINESSES IN THE HOPE OF BRINGING PROSPERITY"

IMAGES Getty Images

THE FOUR JAPANESE SKY GODS

THE FOUR SKY GODS GUARD THE NORTH, WEST, SOUTH, AND EAST. THEY REPRESENT THE FIVE CHINESE ELEMENTS (EXCEPT EARTH, WHICH IS THE LAND ITSELF)

WRITTEN BY **ICY SEDGWICK**

Called the Shijin, or Four Symbols, the Chinese Sky Gods originated from Taoism. They arrived in Japan from China in the 7th century.

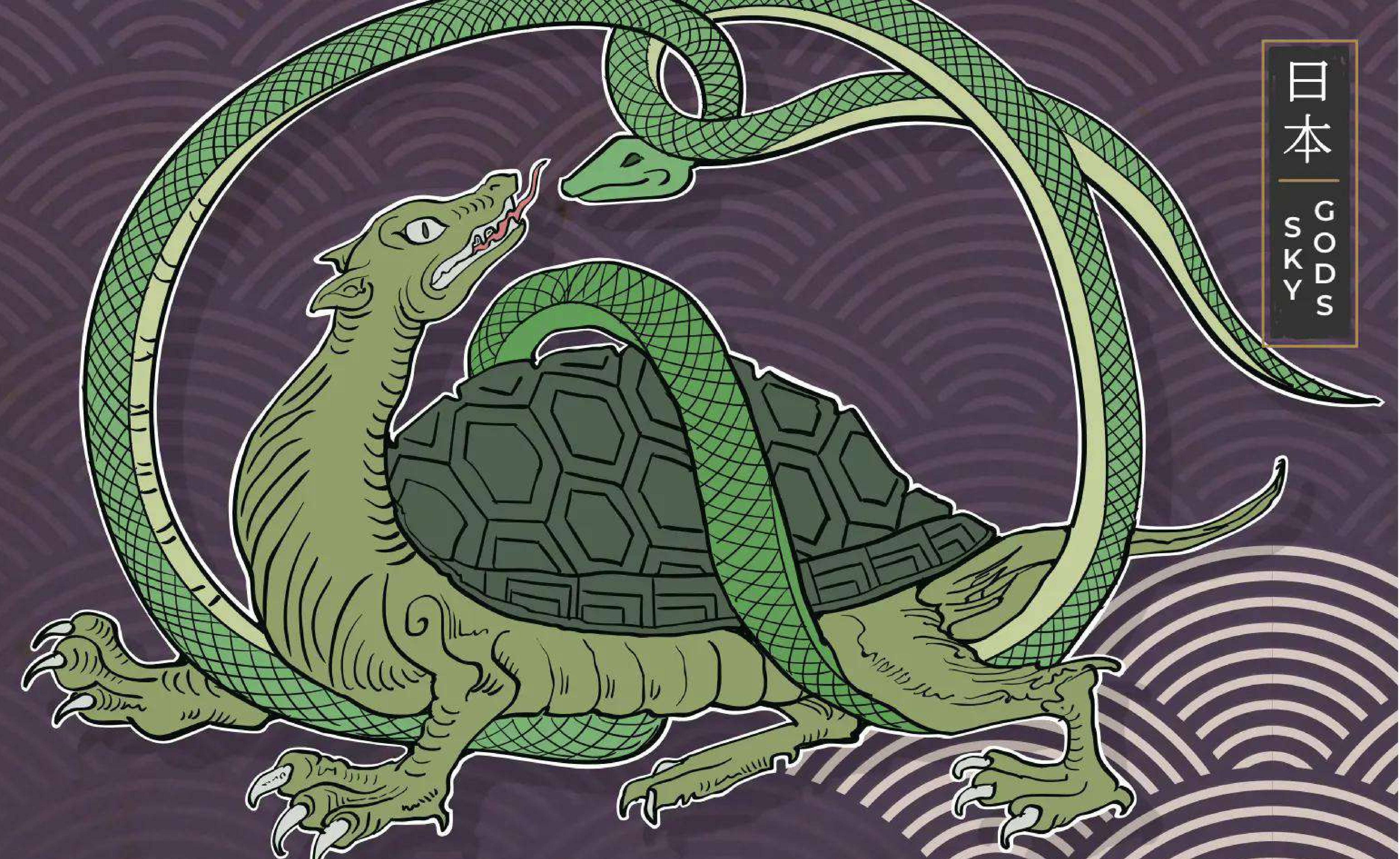
The ancient builders of Japan dedicated each quarter of their capitals to the Shijin. They chose the locations of the cities based on geographical features that corresponded with the four gods. A site with a river in the east, a plain in the south, a road to the west and a mountain to the north was ideal, and it was believed that the Shijin would protect a city in such a location.

However, belief in the Shijin waned over time, as people turned to the Four Heavenly Kings from Buddhism, although their symbols remain.

THE FOUR GUARDIANS

Genbu, or 'Dark Warrior', dwells in the north. He is depicted as a tortoise, or a tortoise/snake hybrid. He is associated with the colour black, winter, and the element of water. He controls the cold although he's also considered a warrior god due to the armour qualities of his tortoise shell. Tortoise shells were once used in divination, so he also has divinatory powers.

Participants carry Seiryū as part of the procession that takes him around Kyoto during the Blue Dragon Festival



A lantern of Byakko at the Enpeimon Gate, which is the west gate in Yokohama Chinatown, Japan

Byakko, or 'White Tiger', lives in the west, and is depicted as a white tiger. He is associated with the colour white, autumn, and the element of metal. He controls the wind, and he's also linked with righteousness.

Suzaku, or 'Vermilion Bird', rules the south, and is depicted as a scarlet bird, much like a phoenix. He is associated with the colour red, summer, and the element of fire. He controls fire and heat, although he's also linked with propriety. Three of Japan's ancient cities had a Suzakumon (Suzaku Gate) at their southern entrance, leading to Suzaku Boulevard, which connected the north and south of the city.

Seiryū, or 'Azure Dragon', lives in the east, and is depicted as a blue dragon. He is associated with the colours green and blue, spring, and the element of wood. He controls the rain, and he represents benevolence and creativity. He often appeared on fountains outside temples. He protects the people of Kyoto from disaster, and the city started holding the Blue Dragon Festival in his honour in 2000.

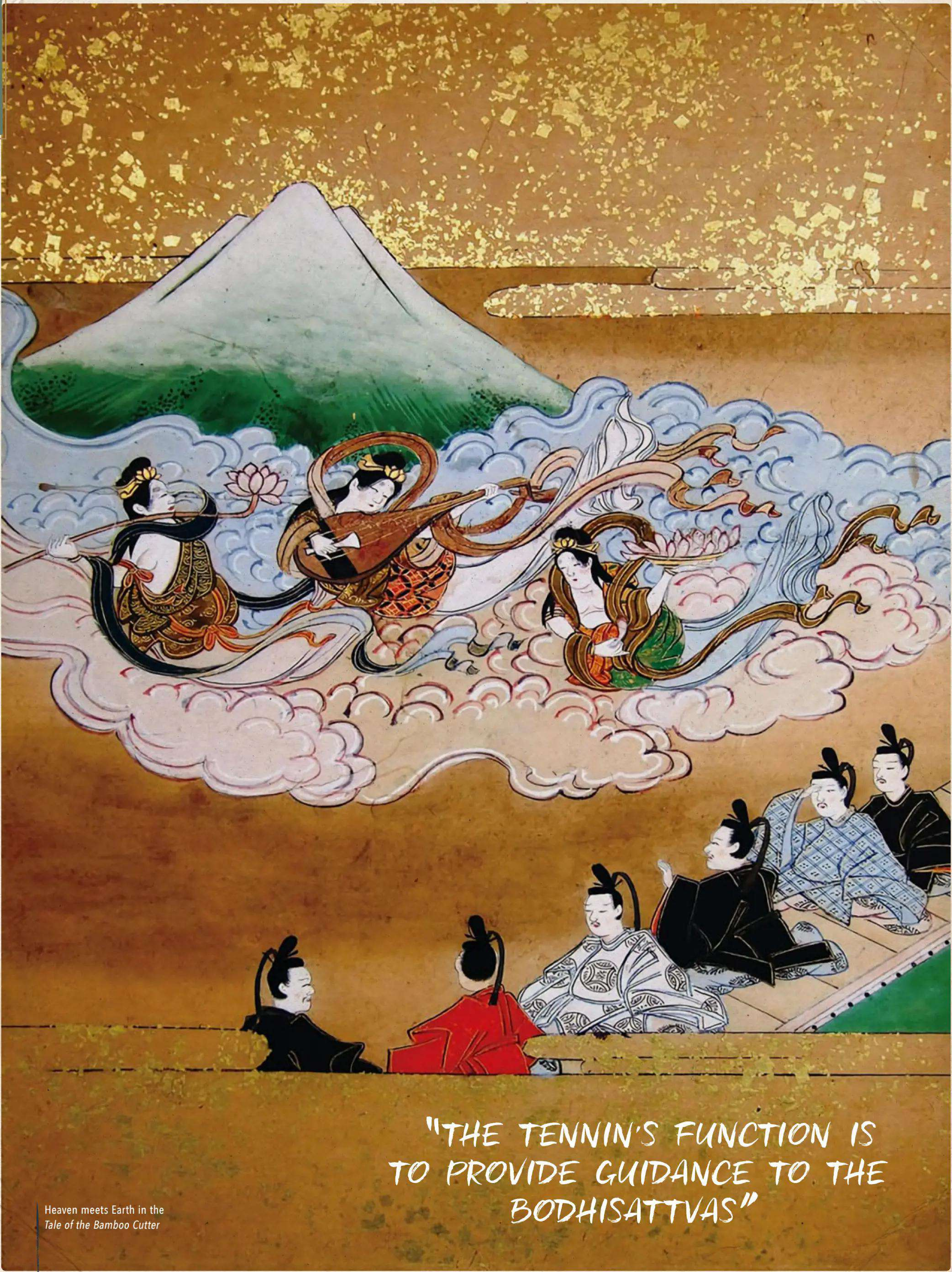
THE LUNAR MANSIONS

Each god rules a quarter of the sky containing seven of the 28 Chinese constellations, also adopted in Japan. Compared to the Western solar calendar, the Chinese calendar is lunar. It's based on the 12 yearly moon phases and the Lunar Mansions refer to the points the moon passes through during these phases. Japan used a lunar calendar until 1872, when they switched to a solar calendar.

The seven constellations of each quarter are visible during their associated seasons, showing the precision of Asian astrology mapped against the observable night sky. Next time you look up at night, see what constellations are visible, and maybe think of the Shijin that rules that part of the sky.

> "THE ANCIENT BUILDERS OF JAPAN DEDICATED EACH QUARTER OF THEIR CAPITALS TO THE SHIJIN"

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy



Heaven meets Earth in the *Tale of the Bamboo Cutter*

"THE TENNIN'S FUNCTION IS TO PROVIDE GUIDANCE TO THE BODHISATTVAS"

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THE TENNIN

DANCING ENCHANTINGLY, ANIMATING OBJECTS AND FLYING WITH THE AID OF THEIR MAGICAL FEATHERED GOWNS, JAPAN'S ANSWER TO THE PAN-CULTURAL CONCEPT OF ANGELS ARE A SIGHT TO BEHOLD

WRITTEN BY **KATE PUTTICK**

What is a tennin? It depends on the job title: tenshi and ten no-tsukai are mysteriously titled 'heavenly messengers'; the hiten are known for their flying prowess and the tennyo are a specifically female deity. Above all though, according to Japanese Buddhist traditions, the tennin's function is to provide accompaniment to the bodhisattvas - beings advancing along the path to Nirvana. But what happens if they venture into human terrain? And how do they fit alongside Japan's packed roster of gods?

A WORLDWIDE PHENOMENON

Unlike some Shinto-rooted mythical creatures (specifically the fairy-like yosei, see p32), the concept of the tennin is said to have started with the Vedic Hindu tradition of the apsara angels in India, travelling along the silk trade routes to Japan, with manifestations in Chinese Taoism developing in parallel along the way. But global folklore experts go even further to say that similar phenomena can be traced worldwide, in what they call the 'swan maiden trope'. From the extremities of the Eurasian continent (the selkies of the Irish Atlantic coasts to the red swan of America's Pacific tribes), native peoples have spun yarns that centre mythical women with birdlike or other animal qualities.

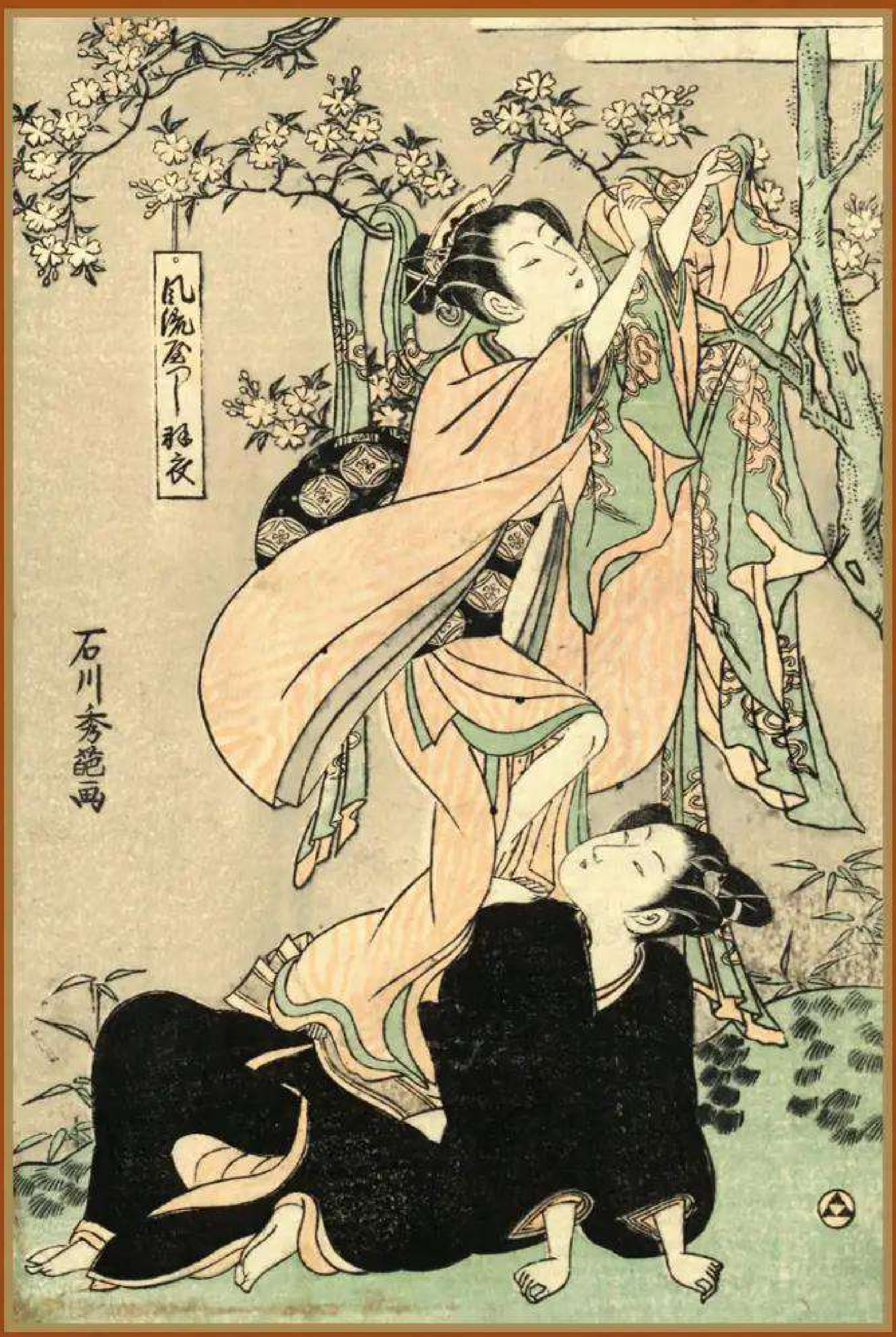
DRESSED TO IMPRESS

An often recurring theme is around the angels' attire. For the Japanese tennin, the standard uniform seems to be a colourful kimono, fine jewellery and delicate scarves. One of the most ubiquitous tales linked to the Japanese tennin is the Noh theatrical play entitled *Hagoromo* (titled after the name for the angels' feathered garb). The story unfolds in ancient Shizuoka in central Japan, where a fisherman happens upon a nude tennin bathing on the coast, with her hagoromo laying to the side. The fisherman takes the robe, intending to keep it to bring luck to his village. The tennin is distraught. Without it she cannot return to the heavens - the robes were her means of flying. The fisherman agrees to give it back if she performs a dance for him. She replies that she would, but that she could not dance without wearing the garment. He reasons that, on giving her back the item, she might renege on her promise and fly away. Her reply? That such deception is the reserve of mortals.

MODERN MEDIA

Another potentially linked myth in the tennin canon is the *Tale of The Bamboo Cutter*, an ancient monogatori (long-form prose piece) that is part of the mythology of the sacred Mount Fuji itself (see page 32). It has appeared in its own Oscar-winning Studio Ghibli adaptation, and is even credited by some as an early example of the sci-fi genre with its lunar-dwelling bit-players. Other modern depictions of the tennin re-frame the gendered aspects of the folklore for today's viewers. Yuu Watase's manga and later anime series *Ceres, Celestial Legend*, notably revisits the Hagoromo tale as part of an intergenerational saga exploring, in part, how the tennin protagonist really felt to be dragged to Earth in such an arguably callous manner, with respectful nods to the myth.

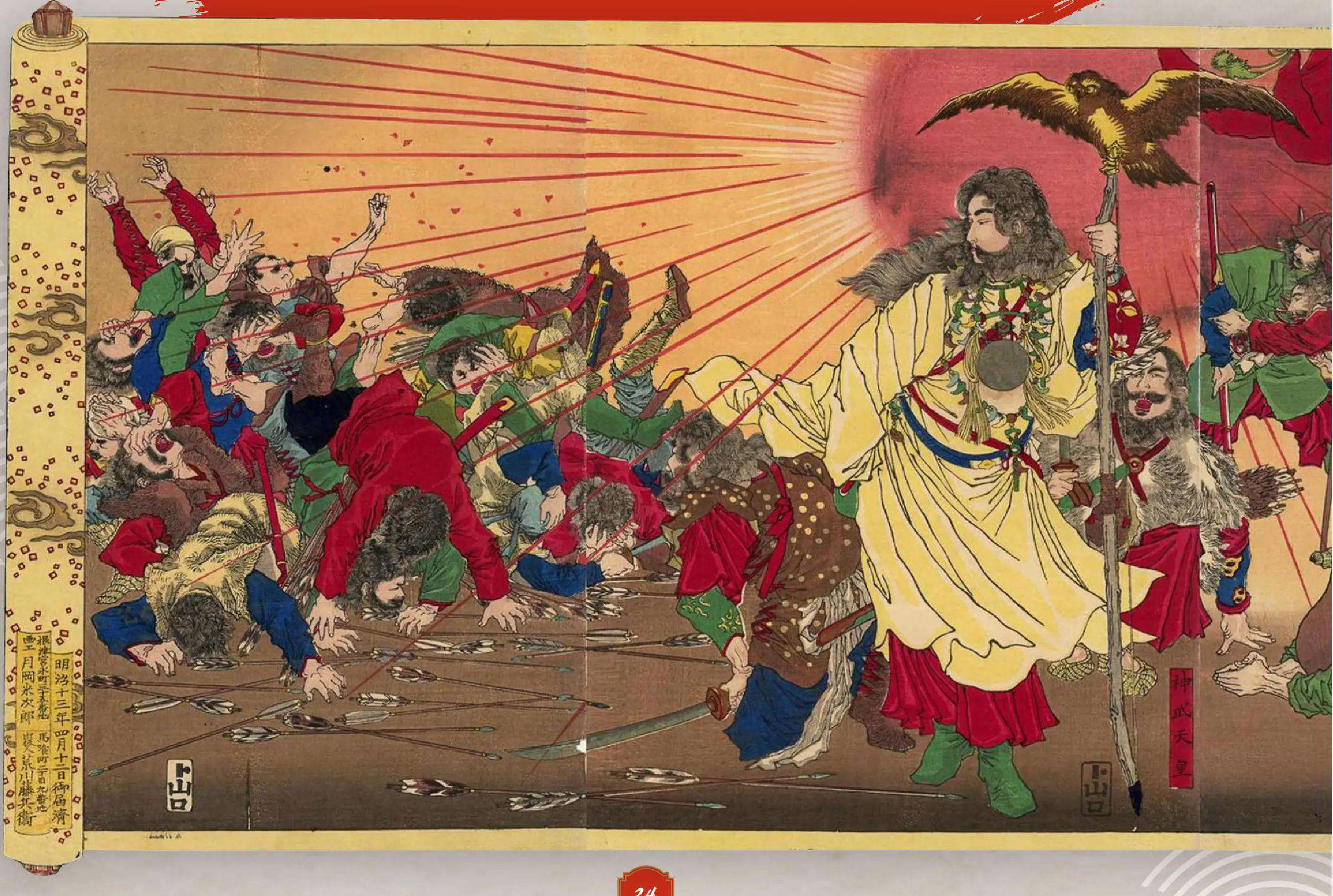
An illustration of the Tale of Hagoromo



GOD EMPERORS & WARRIOR QUEENS

THE EARLIEST HISTORY OF JAPAN IS SHROUDED IN MYTHS AND LEGENDS OF EMPERORS DESCENDED FROM GODS AND QUEENS WHO WAGED BLOODY WARS

WRITTEN BY **BEN GAZUR**


明治十三年四月十二日御届済
神武天皇

The human history of Japan dates back at least 30,000 years. At that point, the four main islands of Japan were connected and land bridges joined them to both Korea in the south and Siberia in the north. The first humans to occupy what is now Japan simply walked in.

While their stories remain in the archaeological record as flint tools and the remnants of settlements, we know almost nothing of their history. The development of writing tells us what the Japanese said about themselves. What little does emerge may be part-myth and part-truth, but it reveals a society often riven by war.

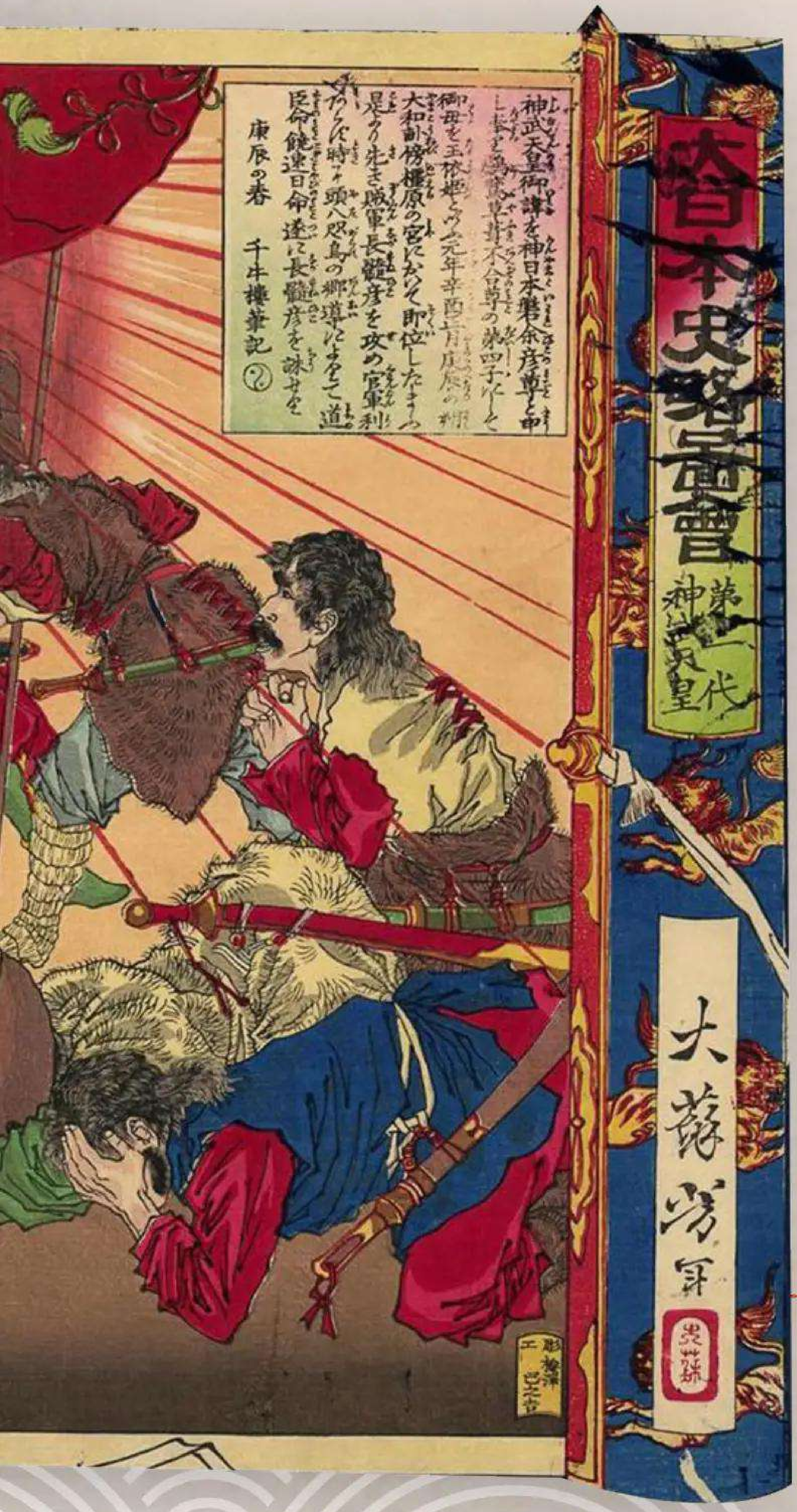
THE JOMON & THE YAYOI

The first culture to develop in Japan was the Jōmon around 10,000 BCE. We do not know what the Jōmon called themselves, but their name comes from their distinctive pottery style of intricately arranged cords, which archaeologists call Jōmon, meaning rope-patterned. Some of the pottery created by the later Jōmon would not look out of place in a modern art gallery. Their stylised pottery statues of people known as dogū so closely resemble spacemen in suits that some take them to be evidence of alien contact.

Contact with space aliens is unlikely, but when contact came between Japan and Asia it spelled the doom of the Jōmon people. Climate change around 1000 BCE saw them driven further south in Japan by cold weather. The Yayoi of China lived in a lush environment that dried out around the same time to create the Gobi desert of today. This destruction of their homelands caused a wave of migration. At first settling in Korea, the Yayoi then began migrating to Japan around 300 BCE. With their arrival, 10,000 years of Jōmon culture disappeared from the archaeological record.

Not much is known about the displacement of the Jōmon. Was it in a single wave of migration? Were they destroyed by warfare? The alternative is that the Yayoi came in smaller numbers over a long period and integrated themselves.

Recent analysis of DNA has revealed that on average, a modern Japanese person derives only around ten per cent of their genes from the Jōmon. However the Yayoi came to Japan, their offspring swamped those of the Jōmon. The indigenous Ainu of Japan share more DNA with the Jōmon though, so it is possible some aspects of Jōmon culture survived through them.



The first emperor of Japan was the legendary Jimmu, who led his people eastward and conquered other kings – with the aid of a three-legged crow

Because of their lack of a writing system, our knowledge of Yayoi culture is limited. But we do know that they formed clans called uji. At the head of each clan stood a man who acted as mediator between humans and kami, as well a military leader. Over time these clans grew in power and territorial size, forming the first states in Japan.

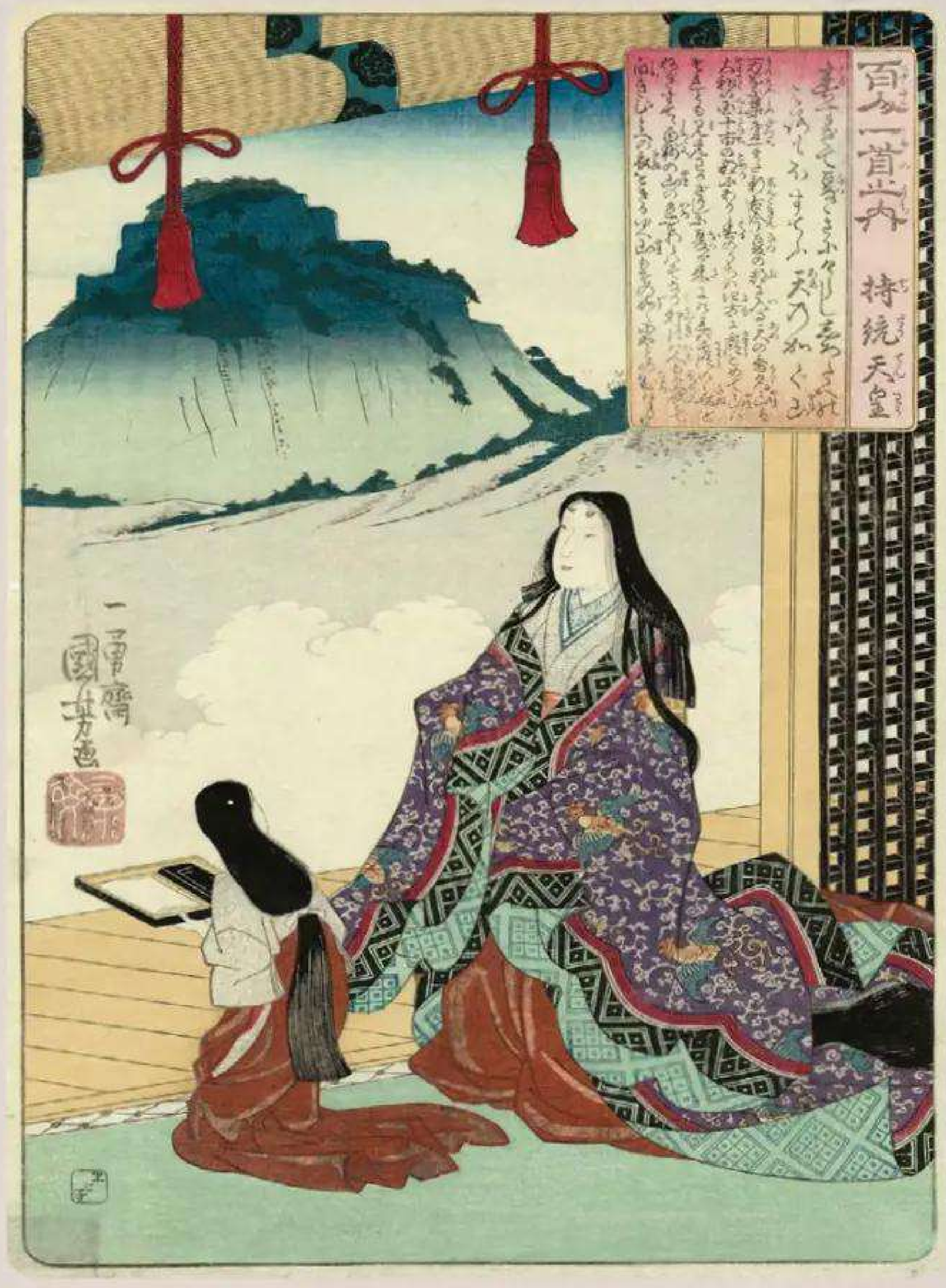
The Yayoi brought crucial innovations to Japan. The cultivation of rice emerged at the same time as the Yayoi arrived. The stone tools of the Jōmon were abandoned in favour of metal implements that allowed greater working of the land. Weapons and armour forged from bronze and iron reached Japan around the same time, mostly imported from China or Korea because of the lack of metal ores in Japan. By the 1st century CE, axe heads, spears and swords made of iron were becoming more common throughout Japan. Conflict between clans drove the need for ever more weaponry.

THE FIRST EMPEROR

According to the two great works of Japanese legend written in the 8th century CE, the *Kojiki* and *Nihon Shoki*, the first emperor of Japan was Jimmu. Born in 711 BCE, Jimmu was a descendant of the goddess Amaterasu and, with his brothers, was the leader of a clan. They sought a location to cement their rule. "By dwelling in what place shall we most quietly carry on the government of the empire? It were probably best to go east."

Together they led their people east. Jimmu was provided with a sword that was magically sent by a deity to use in battle. As they travelled east, they fought a clan under the command of Nagasunehiko – the long-legged man – and were defeated. Jimmu realised that because they were fighting eastwards, they were fighting against the rising of the sun and so approached from the east, under the guidance of an eight-foot-long crow. This time Jimmu was victorious and settled the land of Yamato. We are told that he "extirpated the unsubmissive people".

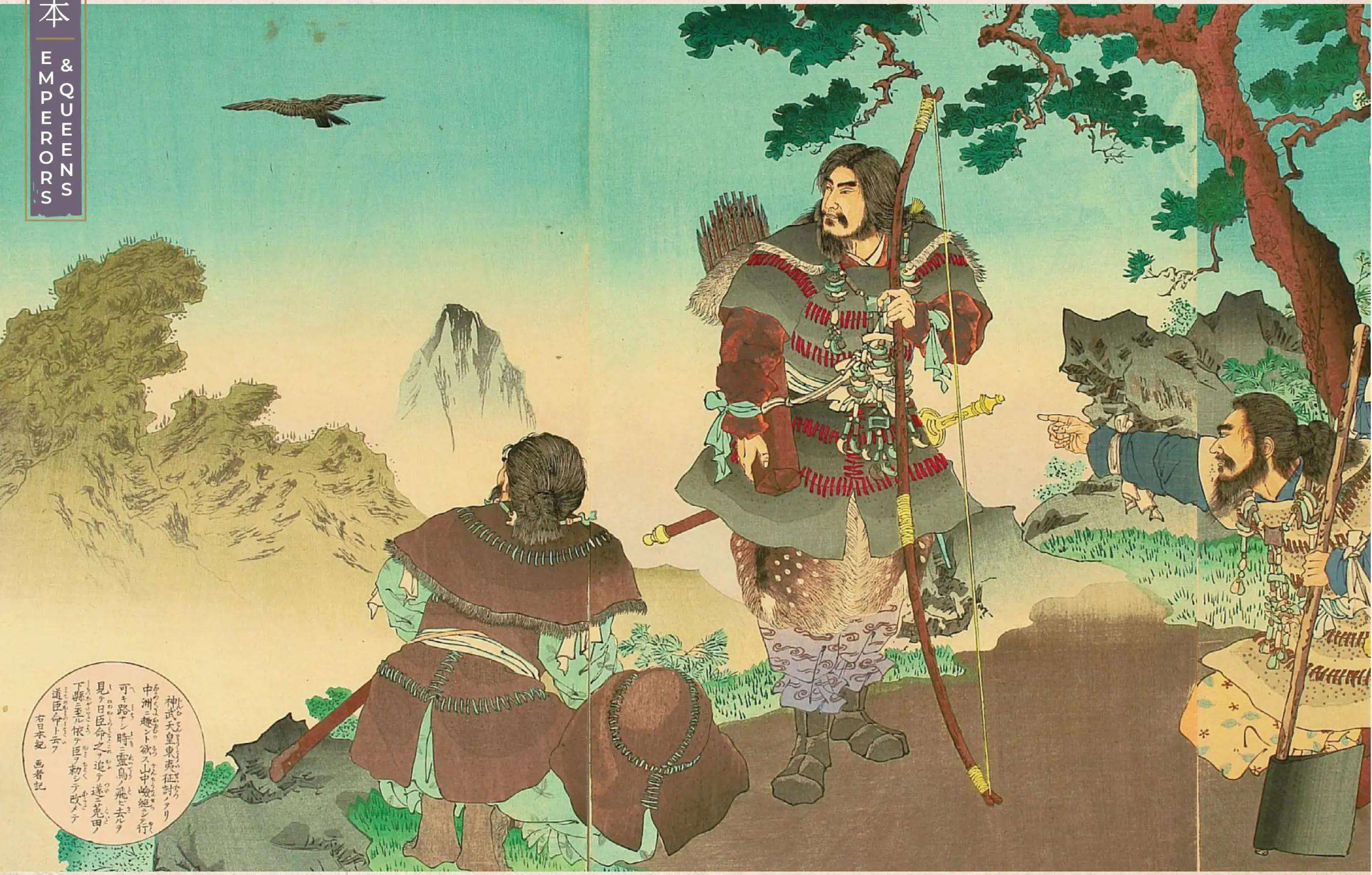
Other clan leaders accepted the right of Jimmu to rule, thus marking his accession as monarch of Japan. Alongside other improbable facts, we are told that Jimmu lived to the age of 126. The chronicles that set down the life of Jimmu were written over 1,000 years after his supposed rule. Many consider Jimmu to be wholly legendary, but some wonder whether the tale of his migration might have echoes of the coming of the Yayoi people to Japan.



The Soga clan and then the Fujiwara clan came to dominate the royal court through marriage of their daughters into the imperial family

THE CIVIL WARS OF WA & QUEEN HIMIKO

Much of Japanese history at this early date is conjectural and little can be known for sure.



The first emperor of Japan, Jimmu, is said to have been descended from the gods and created the imperial throne through conquest

"PEACE WAS RESTORED BUT DID NOT LONG SURVIVE HIMIKO'S DEATH"

Early Chinese accounts of their interactions with the Japanese, who they called Wa, record the trade of iron weapons and also the reasons they may have been required.

According to Chinese sources: "During the reigns of Huandi [147-168 CE] and Lingdi [168-189 CE] the country of Wa was in a state of great confusion, war and conflict raging on all sides. For a number of years, there was no ruler. Then a woman named Himiko appeared. Remaining unmarried, she occupied herself with magic and sorcery and bewitched the populace. Thereupon they placed her on the throne." This civil war of the Wa is the earliest historical war in Japan of which we have a written record, but much remains mysterious.

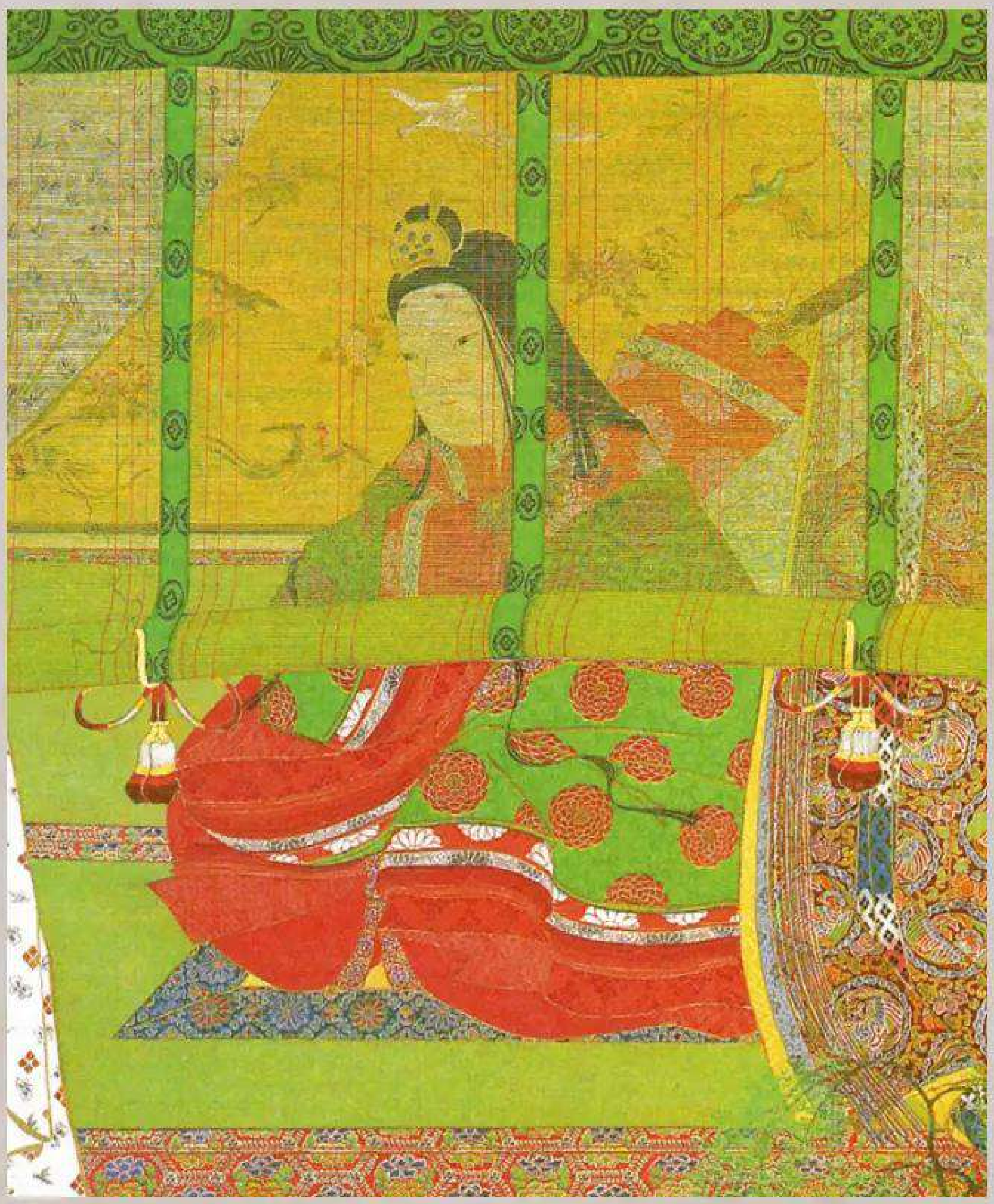
Himiko is said to have been a shaman and queen of Yamatai, whose location remains unknown. We are told she lived in a palace surrounded by ever-vigilant guards. She had 1,000 female attendants, but only one man who relayed her orders. Apparently Himiko was a great ruler and brought peace to her kingdom. She sent emissaries to the Chinese court and received praise in return.

Himiko did not pacify all of Japan, however, and Himikuko, ruler of a rival state, rose in conflict against her. Peace was restored but did not long survive Himiko's death. "Then a king was placed on the throne, but the people would not obey him. Assassination and murder followed; more than 1,000 were thus slain. A relative of Himiko named Iyo, a girl of thirteen, was then made queen and order was restored."

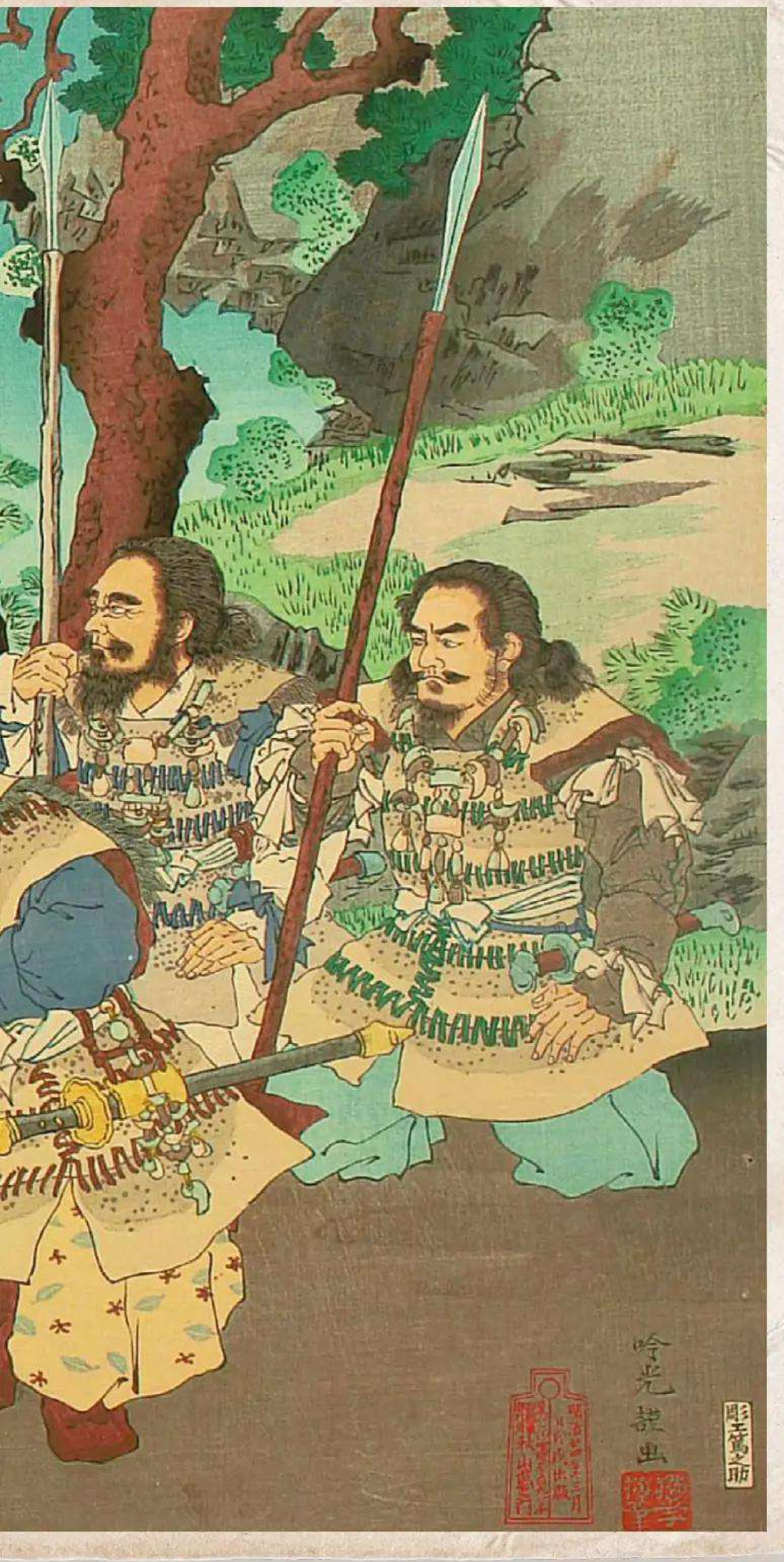
Japanese sources make no mention of Himiko, but some scholars have sought to link her with many other powerful queens of around this time.

JINGU & THE SEVEN-BRANCHED SWORD

Empress Jingū is said to have reigned from 201-269 CE following the death of her husband, Emperor Chūai. Chūai died without any obvious heir, and Jingū acted as regent for their unborn



Empress Kōken abdicated but continued to influence behind the scenes – until she retook the throne with the monk Dōkyō by her side



child. The *Nihon Shoki* gives an account of her rule and the many acts of warfare that were carried out under her leadership.

As soon as Jingū came to the throne, she sought to put down potential rebellions. We are told that one village leader, Hashiro Kuma-washi, would not obey imperial decrees because he was "a fellow of powerful frame, and had wings on his body, so that he could fly, and with them soar aloft". Jingū struck down the rebel and pacified the region. In one area she avoided battle by executing the sister of an obstreperous general as a warning to any potential revolutionaries.

Jingū's greatest exploit, however, was her invasion of Korea. She announced that she "intended in person to chastise the West". Understanding that it was a patriarchal society that she was attempting to lead, she informed her army: "Although I am a woman, and a feeble woman too, I will for a while borrow the outward appearance of a man, and force myself to adopt manly counsels."

With a mighty fleet and army, Jingū crossed the sea, taking up a battle-axe herself. When the enemy king saw the forces arrayed against him, he surrendered, completely and utterly. Other kings and lords also offered rich annual tributes to Jingū. After returning to Japan, she finally gave birth to her husband's heir – a full three years after his death. Much, it may be assumed, is legendary in the tales of Jingū, but many historians do believe that there was a reigning empress around this time to whom myths and tales of Jingū were later attached.

In the Japanese account of her life, we are told that a "seven-branched" sword was presented to Empress Jingū as part of the tribute. Intriguingly, a sword with seven branches off the main blade still exists today. Held in the Isonokami Shrine in Nara prefecture, its Chinese inscription says: "Never before has there been such a blade. The crown prince of the king of Baekje, who lives under august sounds, had this sword made for King of Wa in the hope that it might be passed on to later generations." Baekje was a kingdom in Korea and this sword, along with the legend of Jingū, may tell us much about the relationship between Japan and Korea at this point in antiquity.

UNIFICATION IN THE KOFUN PERIOD

Empress Jingū is generally considered the last ruler of the Yayoi period. The Kofun period that followed is marked by the growing power of the Yamato emperors, descendants of Jingū. Their increasing power is seen in the large Kofun tombs that they were buried in, from which the period takes its name.

These graves are packed with sophisticated arms and armour. Swords have been found

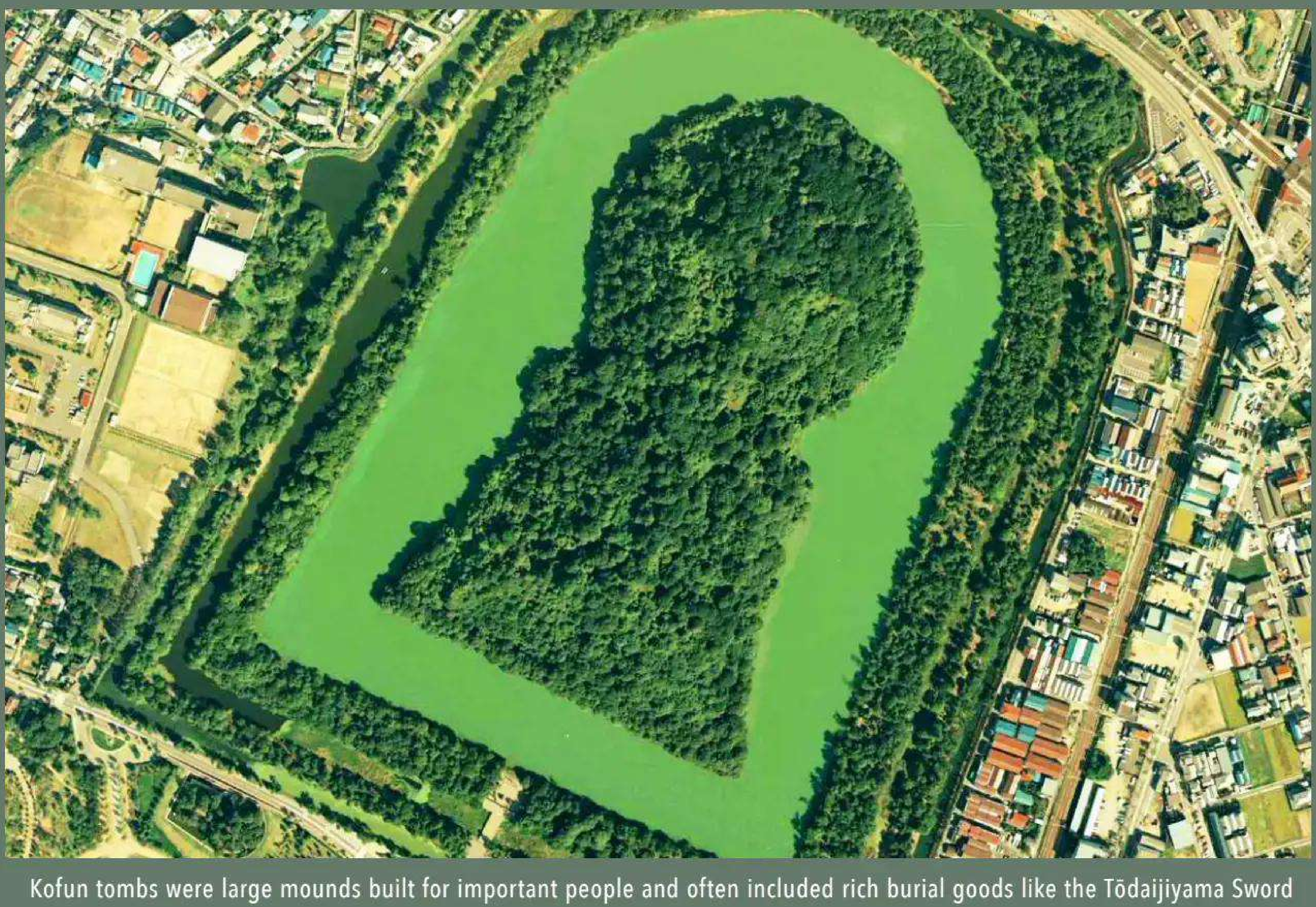
THE TŌDAIJIYAMA SWORD

THE KOFUN TOMBS OF JAPAN WERE THE BURIAL SITES OF IMPORTANT JAPANESE PEOPLE – PEOPLE WHO WERE OFTEN SENT TO THE AFTERLIFE WITH RICH GRAVE GOODS LIKE SWORDS

In the 140-metre-long tomb at Tōdaijiyama, one sword was found that revealed much about Japan in the 2nd century CE.

Inside the tomb were 29 iron swords. One of these, 1.1 metres long, was inlaid with a Chinese inscription in gold, reading: "This ornate sword was manufactured in an auspicious day of the fifth month in the… Zhongping era. The metal from which it has been wrought has been refined many times; it is pure… The fortune of the one who wears it will accord with the stars…" The Zhongping era refers to the rule of the Chinese Emperor Ling of Han, which spanned five years, from 184 to 189 CE.

Was this sword sent from China to a Japanese king? All we can know is that the sword was a treasured item. The tomb it was found in was built in the 4th century, 200 years after the sword was first forged. Other inscribed swords are known, but the Tōdaijiyama Sword is by far the earliest.



Kofun tombs were large mounds built for important people and often included rich burial goods like the Tōdaijiyama Sword with glittering, gilded hilts shaped like animals from myth. Iron armour is often decorated with bronze and gold. These implements of war became necessary as the Yamato sought to increase their power and territory.

At the court in Yamato, the emperors – or Ōkimi, meaning great king, as they called themselves – ruled over a complex web of clans. Some clans were given special roles; the Otomo and Mononobe were often placed in charge of the military, while others served ritual roles or as ministers of state. Inconvenient sons who might otherwise have muddied the line of the imperial succession were sometimes given new surnames and roles, occasionally creating new clans in the process.

Thanks to clay models left as grave offerings from this period, we know that there was a highly developed cavalry that rode horses with saddles and stirrups. These Haniwa figures also show soldiers in suits of armour made from overlapping plates and armed with a sword worn at the hip. Using clan leaders to muster and command armies, the Yamato emperors were able to subjugate the southern half of Japan under their rule.

THE ARRIVAL OF BUDDHISM

Japan continued to receive migrants from East Asia throughout the Kofun period. As well as introducing the Chinese writing system and methods of organising an imperial court, many immigrants rose to prominent positions. The incoming people were called Toraijin, and by the 9th century, nearly one-quarter of the clans in the Honshu region could trace their ancestry back to ancestors from outside Japan.

The migrants also brought with them Buddhism for the first time, marking the start of the Asuka Period. In Japanese tradition, Buddhism came to Japan when a king from Korea sent Emperor Kinmei Buddhist images and texts in 552 CE. The emperor is said to have declared: "Never have I heard of such an exquisite teaching." But while he may have been impressed, several clans were not so taken with Buddhism. The Mononobe and Nakatomi clung to the traditional teachings of Shinto, believing that Buddhism would harm the relationship with the kami spirits and thus Japan. While Buddhism was not made the official religion, the Soga clan was allowed to adopt it.

The Soga clan was influential at court and several of its members married into the imperial family. Kinmei's son, Emperor Bidatsu, married a daughter of the Soga clan, taking her as his second wife. When Bidatsu died, conflict broke out, with the Soga looking to place the emperor's younger, Soga-blooded son on the throne.

At the Battle of Mount Shigi, the Soga triumphed. According to some, this was through divine aid when they invoked Buddhist symbols. What is known is that an arrow struck down the head of the Mononobe clan, his closest advisers were killed, and his troops scattered. The Soga now firmly embedded Buddhism into Japanese culture.

They continued to influence imperial politics until 645 when the leader of the Nakatomi clan conspired with Prince Ōe to assassinate a member of the Soga clan. This was done in front of the reigning Empress Kōgyoku. Shocked by the murder, she abdicated in favour of her brother. The Asuka period came to an end with the Taika Reforms brought in by Prince Ōe that saw greater centralisation of power in the hands of the emperor. Clans were still influential, but much of their ability to control the throne was removed, limiting their overall power in the imperial court and making it a little harder for one clan to influence the ruler

EMPRESS KŌKEN & THE MONK DŌKYŌ

In 749 CE, an imperial princess took the throne as Empress Kōken. Her father had no direct male heir and ruled alongside her. When he died in 756, his will stated that Kōken's heir would be Prince Funado. However, Kōken was convinced by the

THE GRASS-CUTTING SWORD

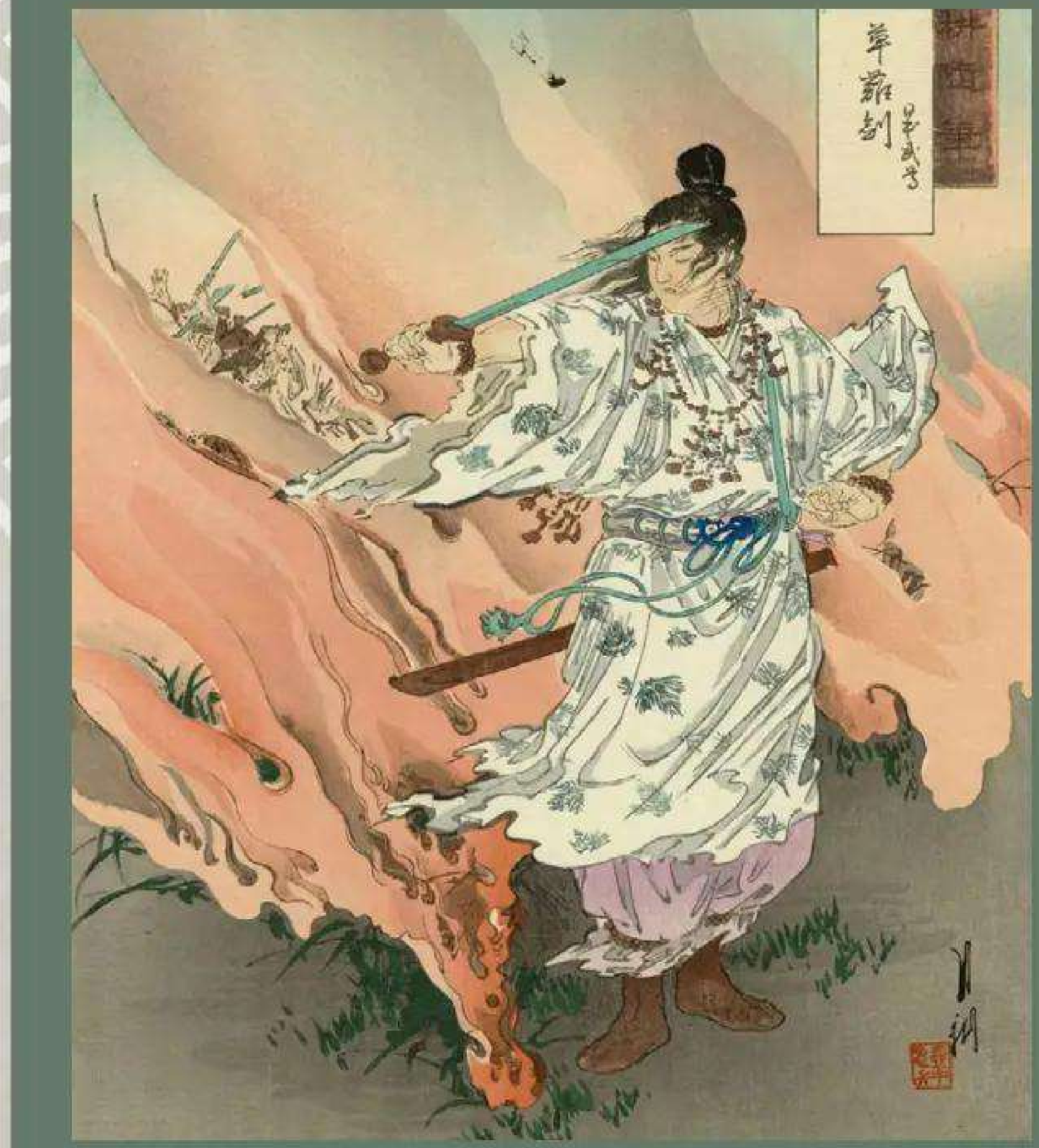
EACH PERSON WHO TAKES THE CHRYSANTHEMUM THRONE OF JAPAN IS PRESENTED WITH THREE LEGENDARY ITEMS

Japan's imperial regalia consists of an ancient gem, a sacred mirror, and a sword known as Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi – the Grass-Cutting Sword.

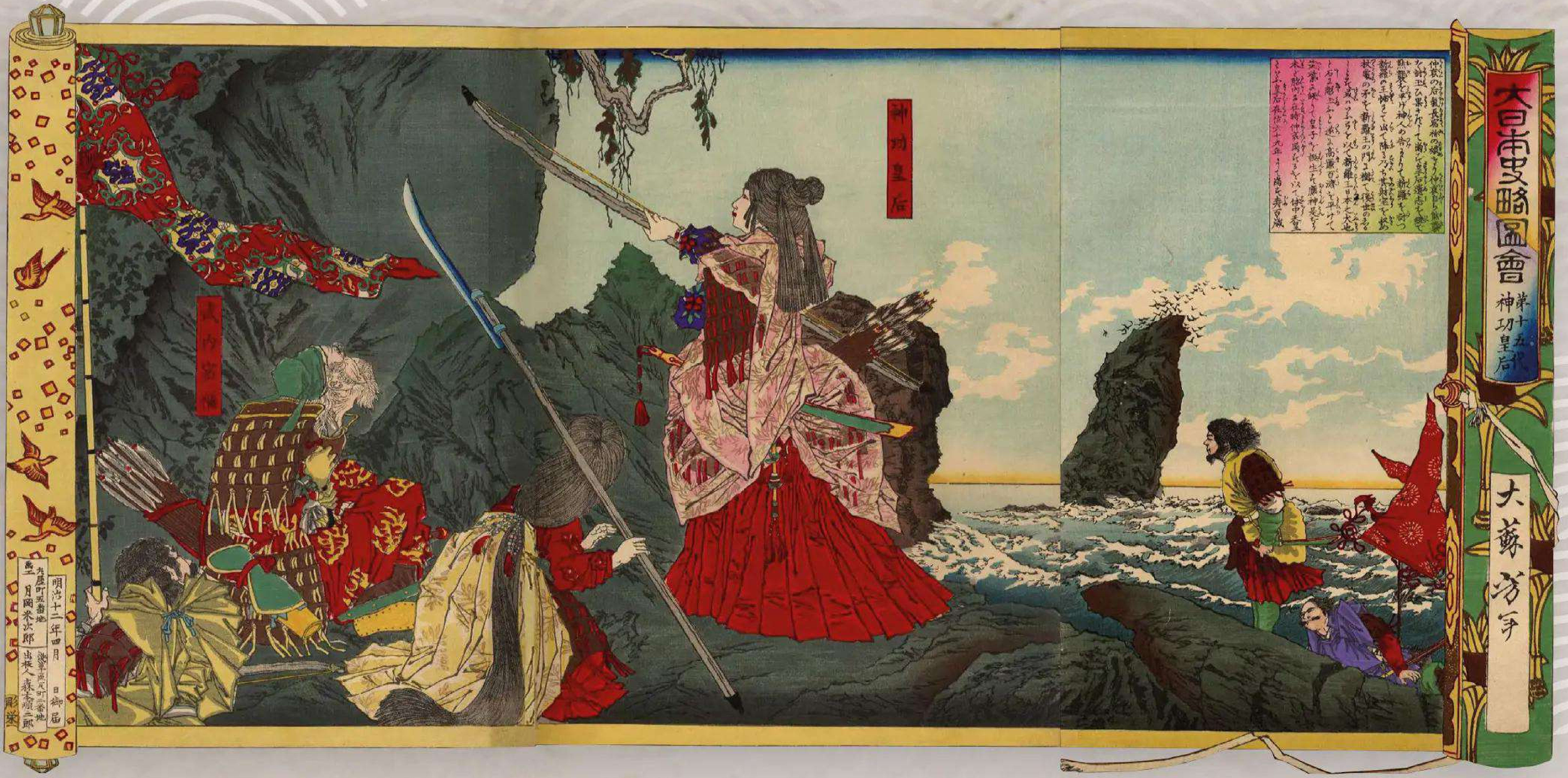
According to a legend set down in Kojiki, a 7th-century chronicle, this famous sword was discovered in a battle between a god and a monstrous eight-headed serpent. Once the beast was slain, Kusanagi-no-Tsurugi was found inside its tail. The sword then passed to the goddess Amaterasu, from whom all Japanese emperors are said to be descended.

The sword was once used to protect the emperor when fire spread across a field. The warrior holding it hacked down the burning grass to put out the fire and discovered with each stroke that he could control the direction of the wind.

According to one record, the original sword was lost in the Battle of Dan-no-ura when it was thrown into the sea to prevent it being captured. The sword currently used at coronations may therefore be an ancient replica. The regalia are closely guarded today so it seems unlikely whether scientific analysis will ever be done to determine the truth of the matter.



The legendary Grass-Cutting Sword earned its name when Prince Yamato Takeru used it to slash down burning grass to save his emperor


神功皇后
大日本史略図會
第十五代 神功皇后
大蘇芳年

"BY THE 9TH CENTURY, NEARLY ONE-QUARTER OF THE CLANS IN THE HONSHU REGION COULD TRACE THEIR ANCESTRY BACK TO ANCESTORS FROM OUTSIDE JAPAN"

powerful Fujiwara no Nakamaro that Funado was insufficiently loyal to the throne and that he should be replaced by Prince Oi. As soon as this was done, conspiracies sprang up not only to return Funado to the line of succession, but to remove Empress Kōken from power.

The conspiracy was soon uncovered and Kōken issued orders to her guards to arrest all involved. The Japanese history *Shoku Nihongi* goes into great detail about how the conspirators were captured, tortured and forced to confess. Empress Kōken issued an edict that told her subjects how the conspirators planned to kill Nakamaro, steal the seals and ritual objects of the crown, and replace her on the throne.

After the attempted coup, Nakamaro became more powerful. Vast revenues were entrusted to him as well as control of the military. In 757, Kōken abdicated the throne, apparently willingly, to Prince Oi, who became Emperor Junnin. Nakamaro remained one of the leading statesmen at court despite the change in monarch.

Kōken continued to be a power at court, but she fell ill in 761. The cure was found through Dōkyō, a Buddhist monk and son of a minor clan. Soon he was attending court with the former empress and some believed that the two had become lovers.

When Kōken recovered, she returned to court, but, in 762, she declared that the Emperor Junnin was not acting as a ruler should. She issued an edict that would make Junnin a mere figurehead while all real power resided with her Threatened by the return of Kōken and an increasingly powerful Dōkyō, Nakamaro raised a rebellion.

Nakamaro attempted to seize the insignia and seals of government as well as replace the compliant Junnin with a stronger emperor. Forced to flee the capital, Nakamaro led his forces east, but imperial troops sent by Kōken blocked his path. When battle turned against Nakamaro he tried to escape on a boat across Lake Biwa. He was captured and, alongside his family, executed – his head taken to decorate the palace walls.

Empress Kōken now deposed Junnin entirely and retook the throne for herself under the title Empress Shōtoku, with the loyal Dōkyō by her side. Unfortunately, there was no end to the power and wealth Dōkyō desired. In 768 a message was sent from the Uza Shrine saying that the gods wanted Dōkyō to be emperor. Shōtoku was puzzled by this divine order so she sent a messenger to confirm that this was really what the gods desired. The oracle replied:

"Since the establishment of our state, the distinction between lord and subject has been fixed. Never has there been an occasion when a subject was made lord. The throne of the Heavenly Sun Succession shall be given to one of the imperial lineage; wicked persons should immediately be swept away."

Dōkyō was seen as a grasping usurper and his hold on power began to loosen. When Empress Shōtoku died in 770, he was removed from every office he held and forced into exile in a low-ranking monastery.

THE FUJIWARA CLAN

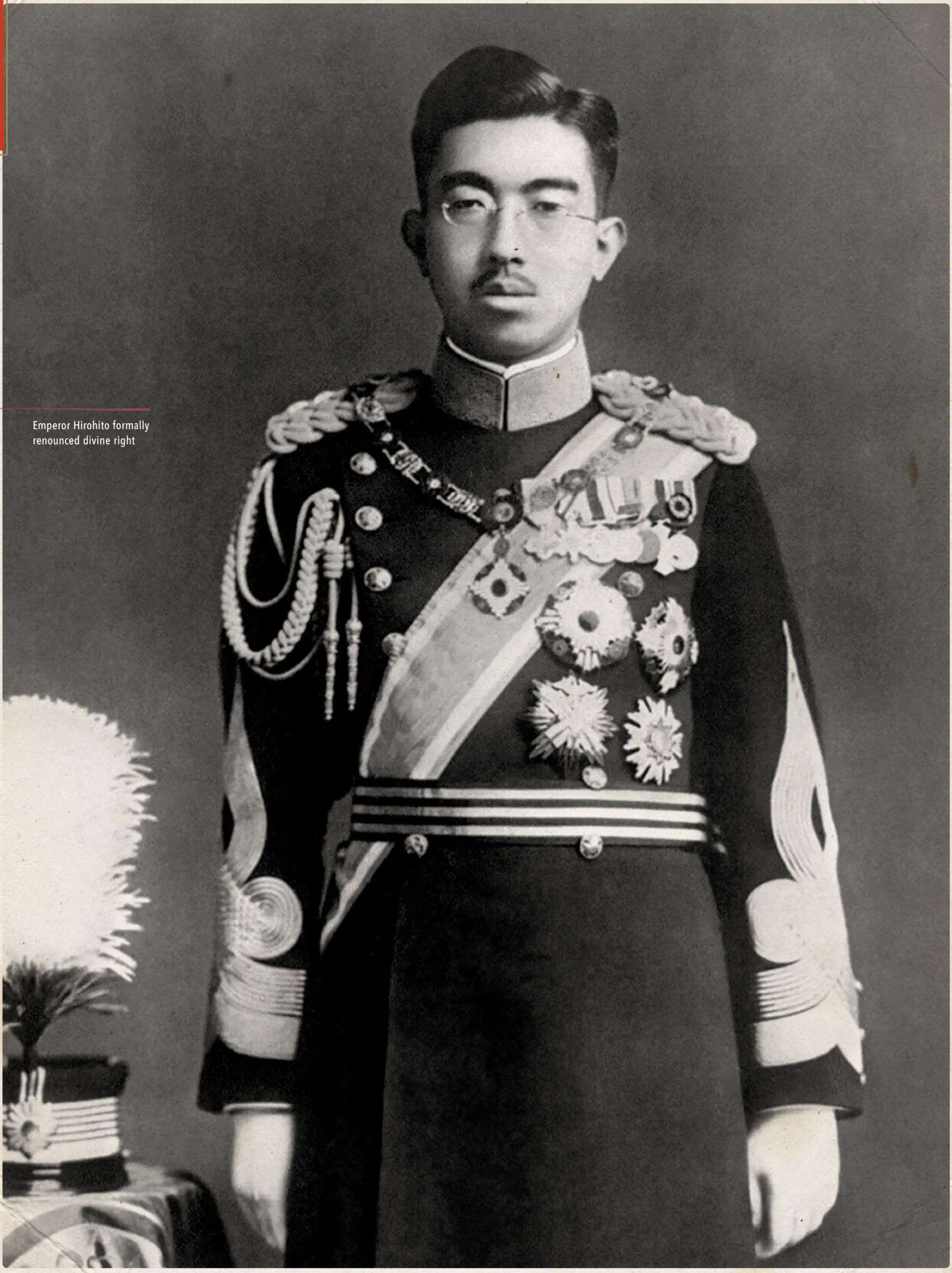
Nakamaro was just one member of the powerful Fujiwara clan. His defeat did not lead to their destruction. Many of the clan had been opposed to his high-handed ways and refused to be drawn into his rebellion. They remained at court even when Dōkyō was in the ascendancy.

With the death of Kōken and the banishment of Dōkyō, the clan waxed ever more powerful. They came to marry into the imperial family, served as regents and governors, and chose emperors as they willed. The rise of the samurai and professional soldiers grew under the Fujiwara as Japan moved into the Heian period.

ABOVE Empress Jingū received divine aid in her conquest of Korea and extracted yearly tribute from the kings she conquered

LEFT Jōmon culture flourished in Japan for 10,000 years and its extraordinary pottery productions give tantalising clues into their society

IMAGES Getty Images, National Land Image Information (Color Aerial Photographs), Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism (sword)



Emperor Hirohito formally renounced divine right

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

JIMMU, SHOTOKU AND DEIFIED ROYALTY

EMPERORS ARE FAMOUSLY SEEN AS DIVINE IN JAPAN – BUT WHAT HAS THAT INVOLVED IN REAL TERMS? LET'S DIG DEEPER

WRITTEN BY **KATE PUTTICK**

Many countries believe in the divine right of royalty – the idea that the monarch is the direct earthly connection between their population and God's will. In Japan, that concept is given more of a substantiated backstory than most. You may have read elsewhere in these pages the story of the creation of the Japanese islands by Izanagi and Izanami; of their daughter Amaterasu, the sun goddess, and her noble mission to bring light and order to the world. She could not do all of this alone, however. It fell to her descendants to assist her.

THE FIRST EMPEROR

The first plausibly historical (or at least not fully mythical) emperor was Amaterasu's great grandson, Jimmu. Reigning from 660 to 585 BCE, he was the first to take the name Tenno – holy sovereign – a title used by monarchs ever since. Securing the Yamato seat of power, the 2,600th anniversary of his reign was celebrated in grand style in 1940.

EMPEROR KINMEI'S STATUE

However important the emperor was symbolically, though, a whole ecosystem of courtiers and military leaders often wielded more power than the monarchs themselves. And the court was certainly not a harmonious place by the reign of the Great Sovereign Kinmei (the 29th emperor). The nobility at that time was sorely divided between those loyal to Japan's native Shinto religion (supported by the aristocratic Mononobe clan) and the newer import of Buddhism (championed by the similarly powerful Soga clan). A struggle between Buddhism and Shinto, as well as the two families, subsequently raged: involving curses, plagues and much tit-for-tat destruction of religious paraphernalia.

PRINCE SHOTOKU

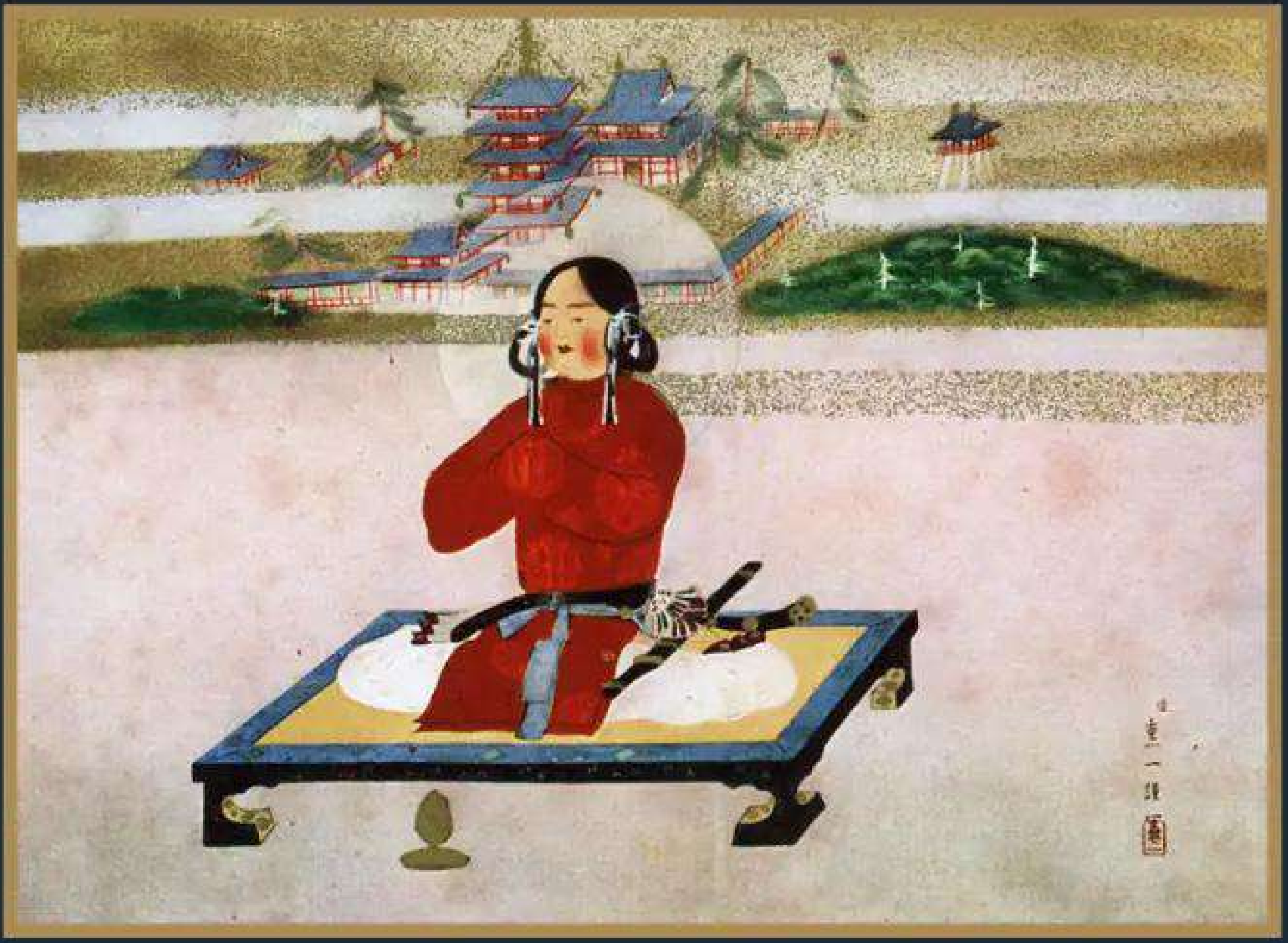
It was into this frey that the legendary young Prince Umadayo (later named Shotoku), weighed in. The precocious son of Emperor Yomei, he was respectful of the Shinto ways, but devoutly Buddhist from an early age – even managing to convert his own father through example – and once supposedly summoned a Buddhist relic into his hand just through prayer. His tangible legacy, as Prince Regent to his aunt, is somewhat functional, if impressive – establishing strong roots for the Buddhist and Confucian traditions, and government infrastructure, with the building of temples and writing of laws. But his legacy is also spiritual. It was said that he was no mere ruler but rather a reincarnation of important Buddhist figures, variously of the Queen Srimala, Guze Kannon, or the monk Bodhidharma. It's hard to therefore distinguish whether some tales from his life are historical or transposed from Buddhist legend. What we do know is that he is a beloved figure of Japan, even appearing on banknotes until recent times.

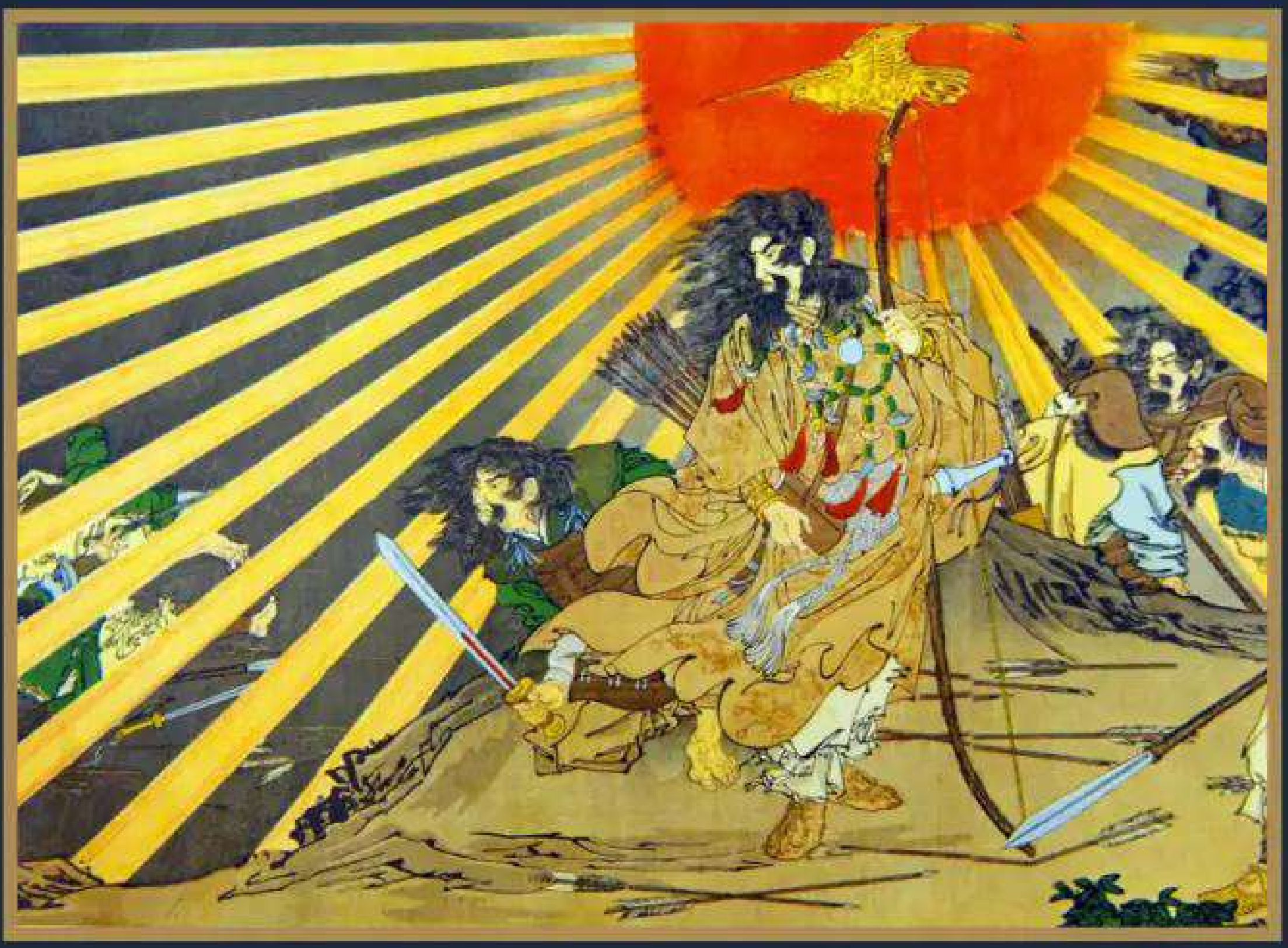
REGAL LEGACY

The godly nature of Japan's imperial family was taken as a given until right up to the 20th century. The belief met a crescendo during the reign of Emperor Meiji and his consolidation of Japanese culture in the face of modernisation. Following World War II, Emperor Hirohito was asked by the US to disavow the nation of the fact of his divinity. Many suggest that it was an empty demand; the Japanese population never saw their emperors as religious pretenders in the first place, but rather the semi-symbolic heirs of Amaterasu – taking on responsibility for the well-being of the island as a sacred duty rather than a doctrine of privilege.

BELOW Prince Shotoku was not just an exemplary leader – many say he was divine is his own right

BOTTOM Emperor Jimmu is considered the first historical emperor





THE YŌSEI

THE FAIRY-LIKE YŌSEI ENJOY A SPIRITUAL BOND WITH THE NATURAL WORLD. NOTED FOR THEIR DELICATE APPEARANCE, THEY'RE USUALLY GLIMPSED IN DEEP FORESTS OR IDYLLIC LANDSCAPES

WRITTEN BY **CATHERINE CURZON**

A BOND WITH NATURE

The powers of the yōsei mirror their connection to nature, with legends variously claiming that they are able to communicate with animals and cultivate flora according to their wishes, creating stunning landscapes around their homes. Those humans who meet with the mysterious and benevolent yōsei can count themselves lucky indeed.

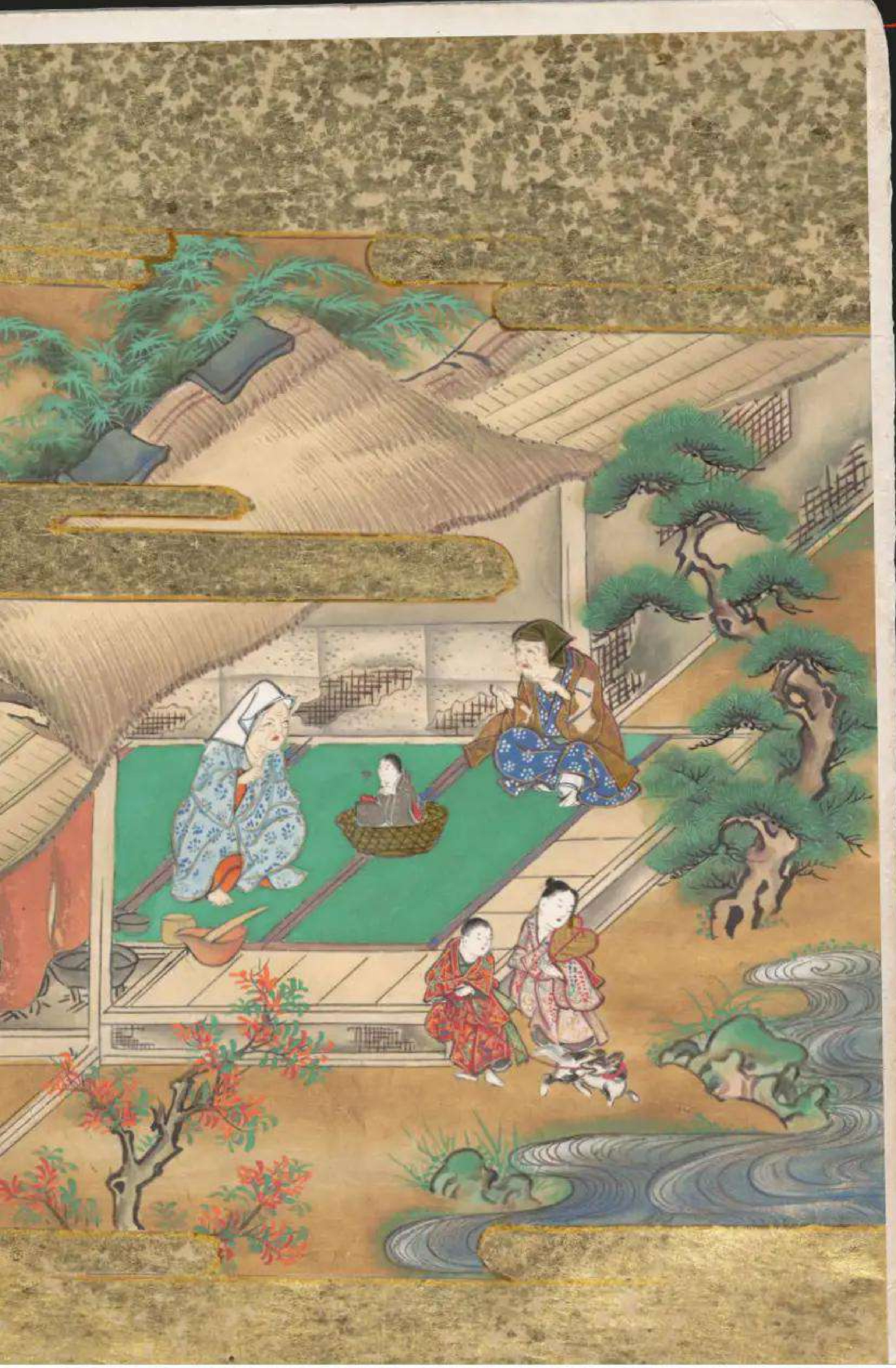
TAKETORI MONOGATAR

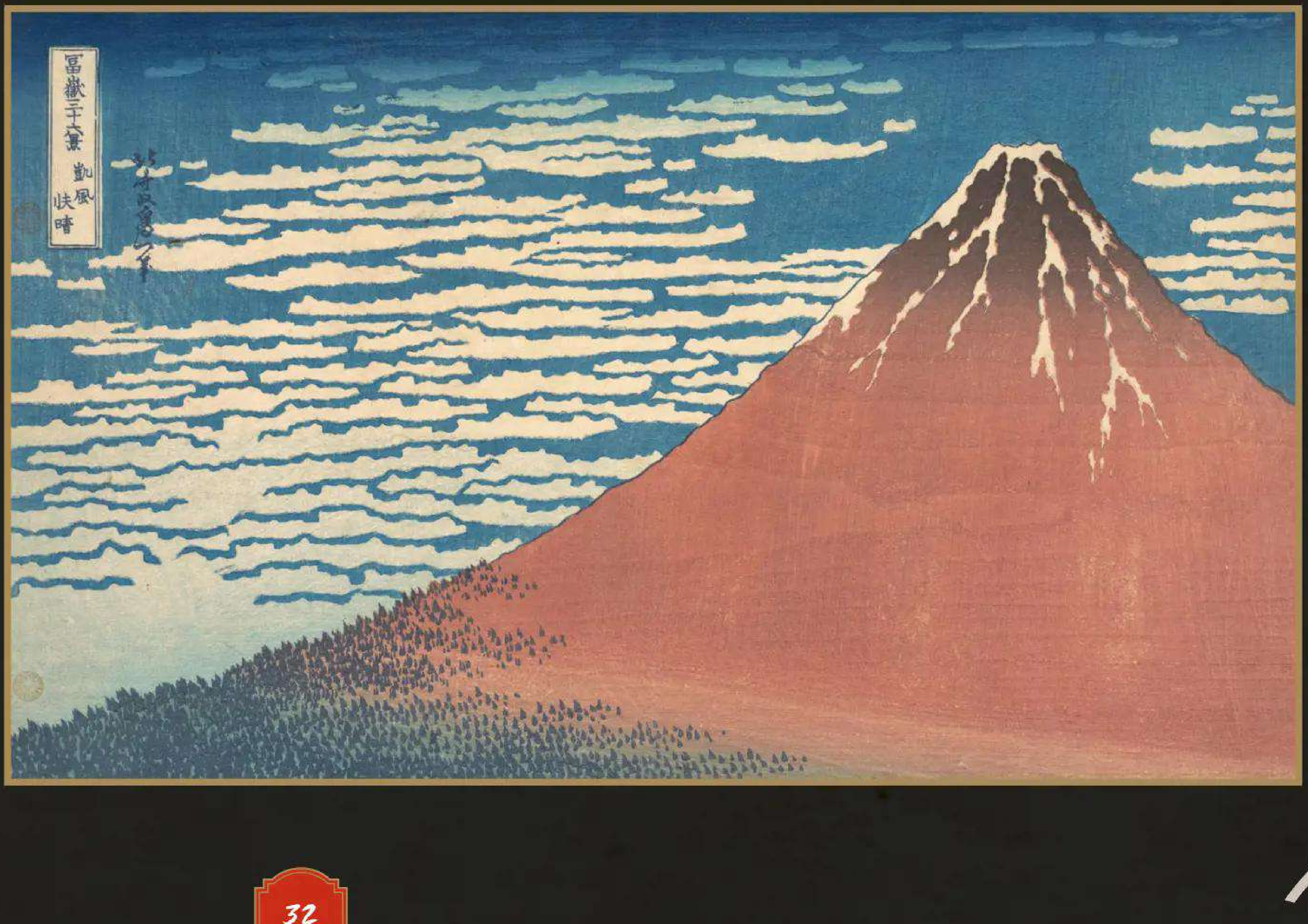
One of the most popular yōsei myths is *Taketori Monogatari (The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter)*. In this 9th century tale, a yōsei is banished to earth from her home on the moon for an unspecified crime. There, she is found as a tiny infant sleeping in a glowing bamboo stalk by bamboo cutter Taketori no Okina. Okina takes her home to his wife and the couple fall in love with the thumb-sized baby, whom they decide to raise as their own, naming her Nayotake-no-Kaguya-hime (Shining Princess of the Young Bamboo). From that day, Okina finds gold inside every bamboo stalk that he cuts.

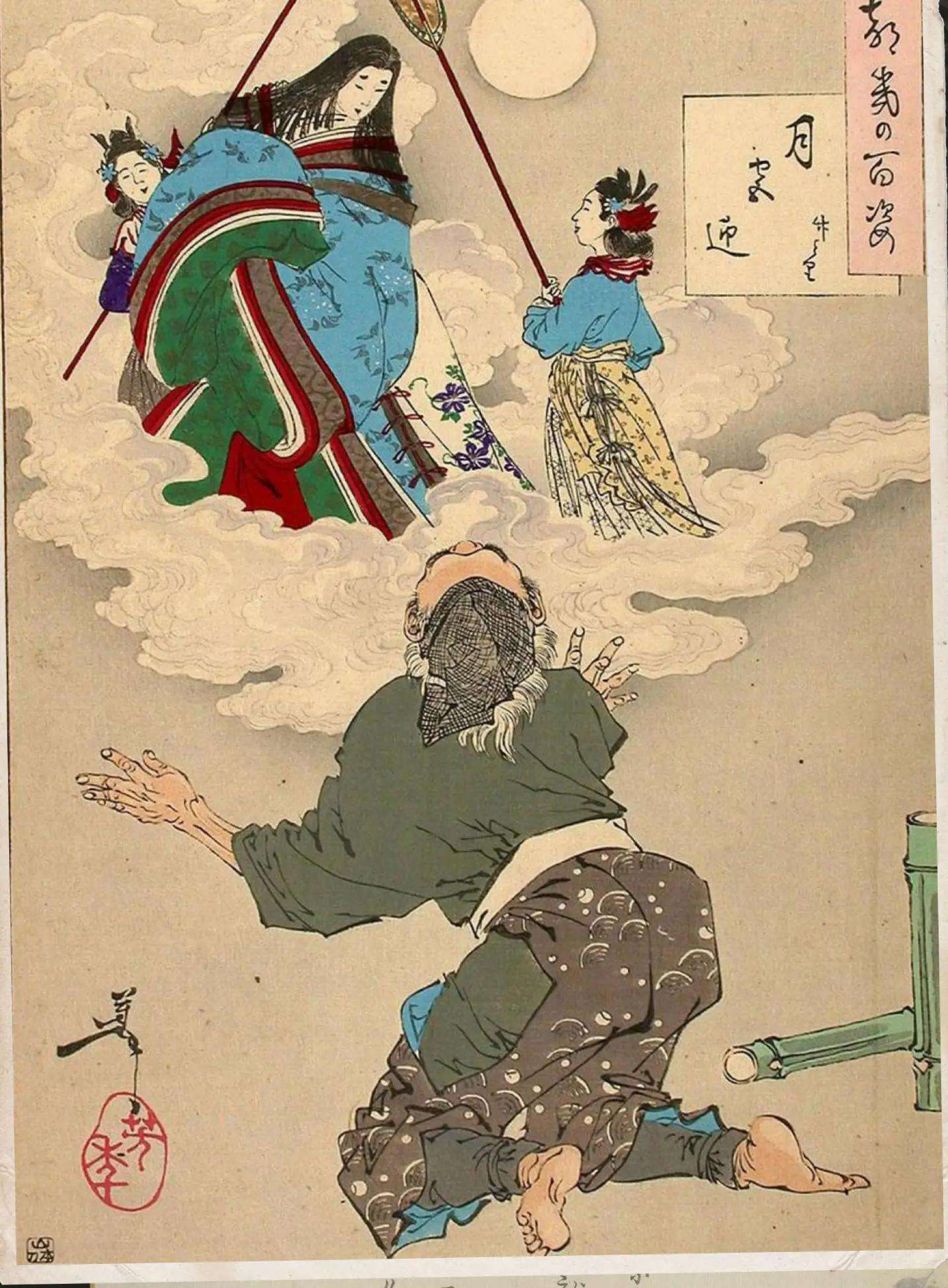
Over a few short months the couple family grow rich as their foundling matures at a startling rate into a beautiful young lady. In order to dissuade her many unwanted suitors, Kaguya-hime sets them a series of five impossible tasks, which they must complete to win her love. She challenges the men to bring her Buddha's stone bowl, a bejewelled bough

BELOW In Japanese folklore, Mount Fuji owes its name to a tragic tale of thwarted love between the Emperor and a yōsei

LEFT The little moon princess is discovered by a bamboo cutter, who takes her home to raise her as his own





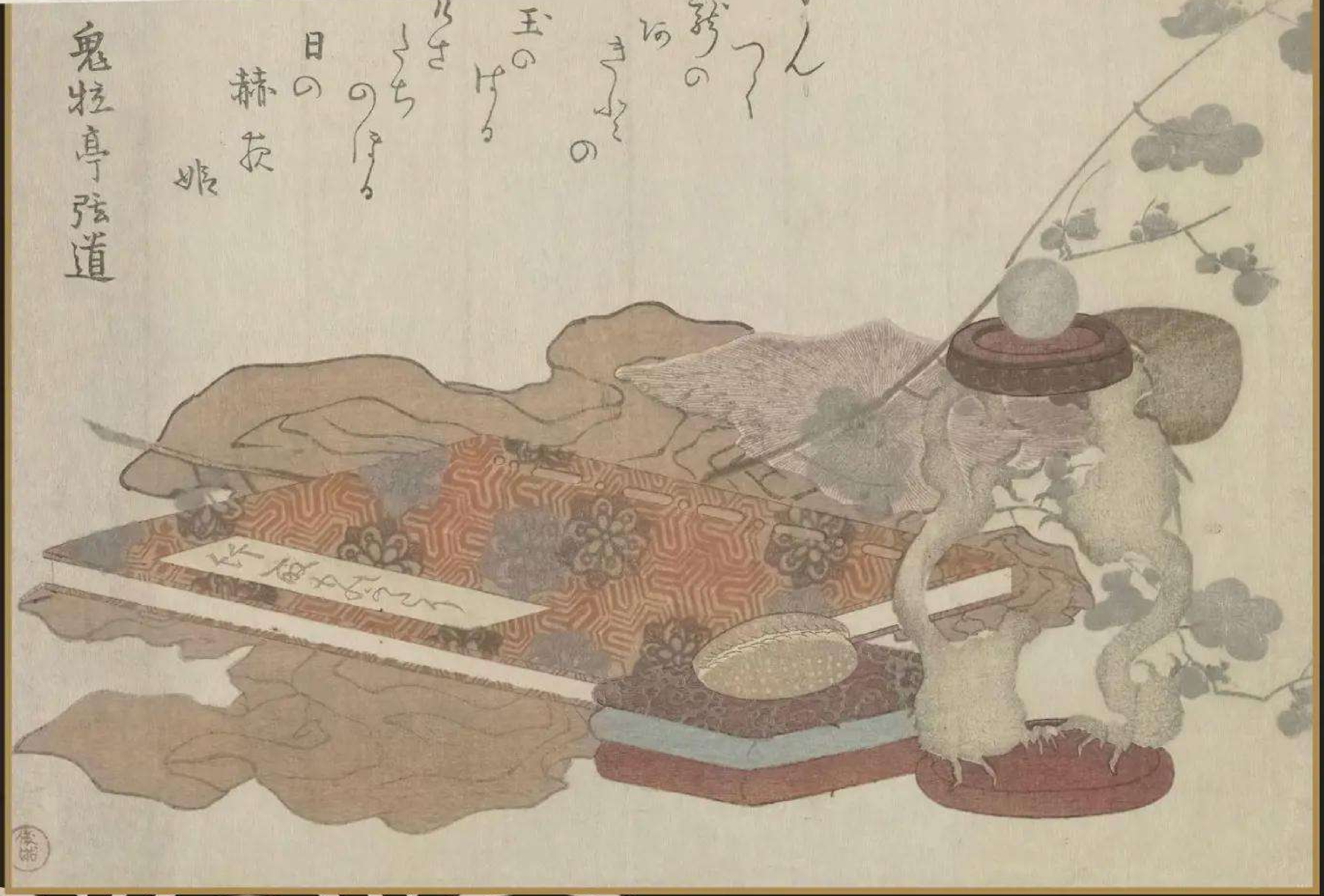


from the legendary island of Hōrai, a jewel from a dragon's neck, a cowrie shell and a robe made of fire rat hide. Each of the suitors fails the challenge until eventually, the Emperor himself proposes to Kaguya-hime. The yōsei rejects the Emperor's proposal, explaining that they are from such different lands that they cannot be together. However, the couple correspond fondly with one another for several years.

Three years after her arrival, a full moon rises and Kaguya-hime enters a period of deep melancholy. Eventually she tells her parents the truth about her origin and admits sadly that the time has come for her to return to the moon. The good fortune that has found the family was a gift from the moon people, who sent gifts of gold to pay for her upkeep.

The desperate Emperor has Kaguya-hime placed under guard, but when the moon people arrive to collect her, they dazzle the guards with a blazing light. A tearful Kaguya-hime says goodbye to her friends and family, leaving the Emperor one final letter and a potion of immortality. With that last act, Kaguya-hime departs the earth forever.

Devastated by her departure, the Emperor orders his men to take Kaguya-hime's letter to the highest peak in the land and burn it. He tells them to cast the potion into the flames too, as he has no desire for immortality without Kaguya-hime. The mountain became known by the name *fushi* (immortality), and is still known today as Mount Fuji, whose volcanic smoke is proof of the burned gifts, forever drifting into the heavens.



> "THOSE HUMANS WHO MEET THE YŌSEI CAN COUNT THEMSELVES LUCKY INDEED"

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

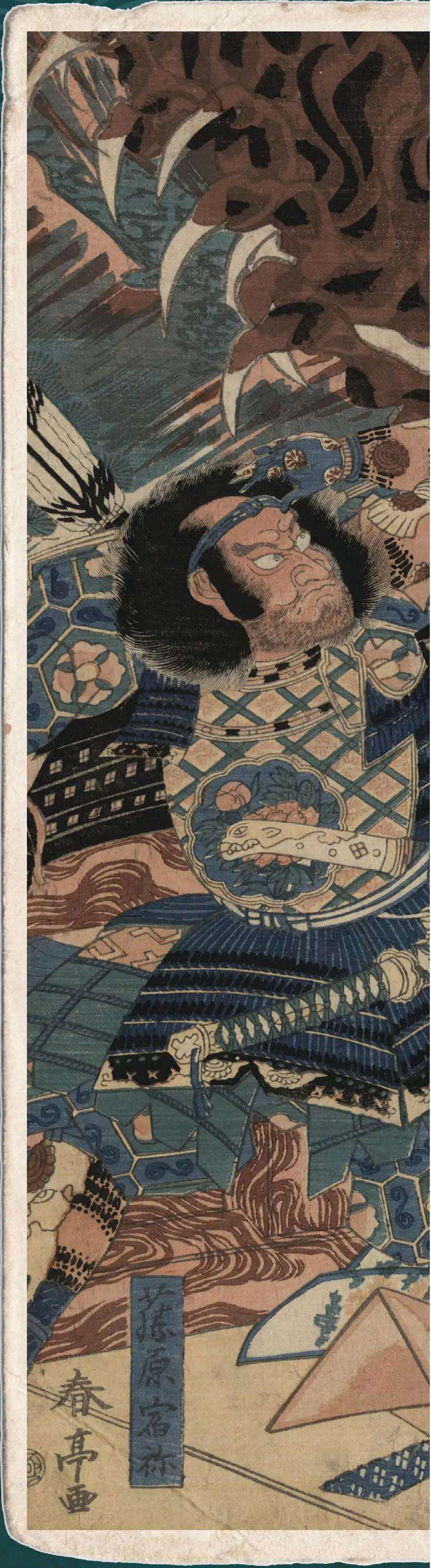
LEFT ABOVE As Kaguya-hime ascends to the heavens and her home on the moon, she leaves her loving adopted parents and the Emperor of Japan devastated

LEFT In order to dissuade her unwanted suitors, Kaguya-hime sets them the impossible challenge of collecting five magical items

THE YŌKAI

THE YŌKAI ARE A GROUP OF SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES INCLUDING DEMONS, SPIRITS, BEASTS AND MORE. NEITHER INHERENTLY GOOD NOR EVIL, THEY HOLD A KEY PLACE IN FOLKLORE

WRITTEN BY **CATHERINE CURZON**



Simply put, yōkai, whose name derives from the characters for suspicious or doubtful, are a class of supernatural creatures. Many have animalistic features, others might be nothing more than a mist, and some might even look like a household object. Many yōkai have the ability to shapeshift and while some are malevolent, others seek little interaction with humans. In early history, these spirits were often blamed for unexplained or unlucky phenomena, though not all had wickedness in mind. In the expansive world of the yōkai there are plenty of evildoers, but also playful characters, more keen on pranking them creating mayhem. Just as their character and behaviour is varied, so too are their origins and, whilst some yōkai are gods, others are fearsome monsters, unknowable spirits or any number of other types of entity.

The folklore around yōkai has been developed and added to over centuries of oral and written tradition, encompassing a mixture of characters that have been both taken from ancient legend and those of subsequent eras. The *Shoku Nihongi* of 797CE warns of the meddlesome presence of yōkai at the Imperial court, and these mysterious creatures never went away.

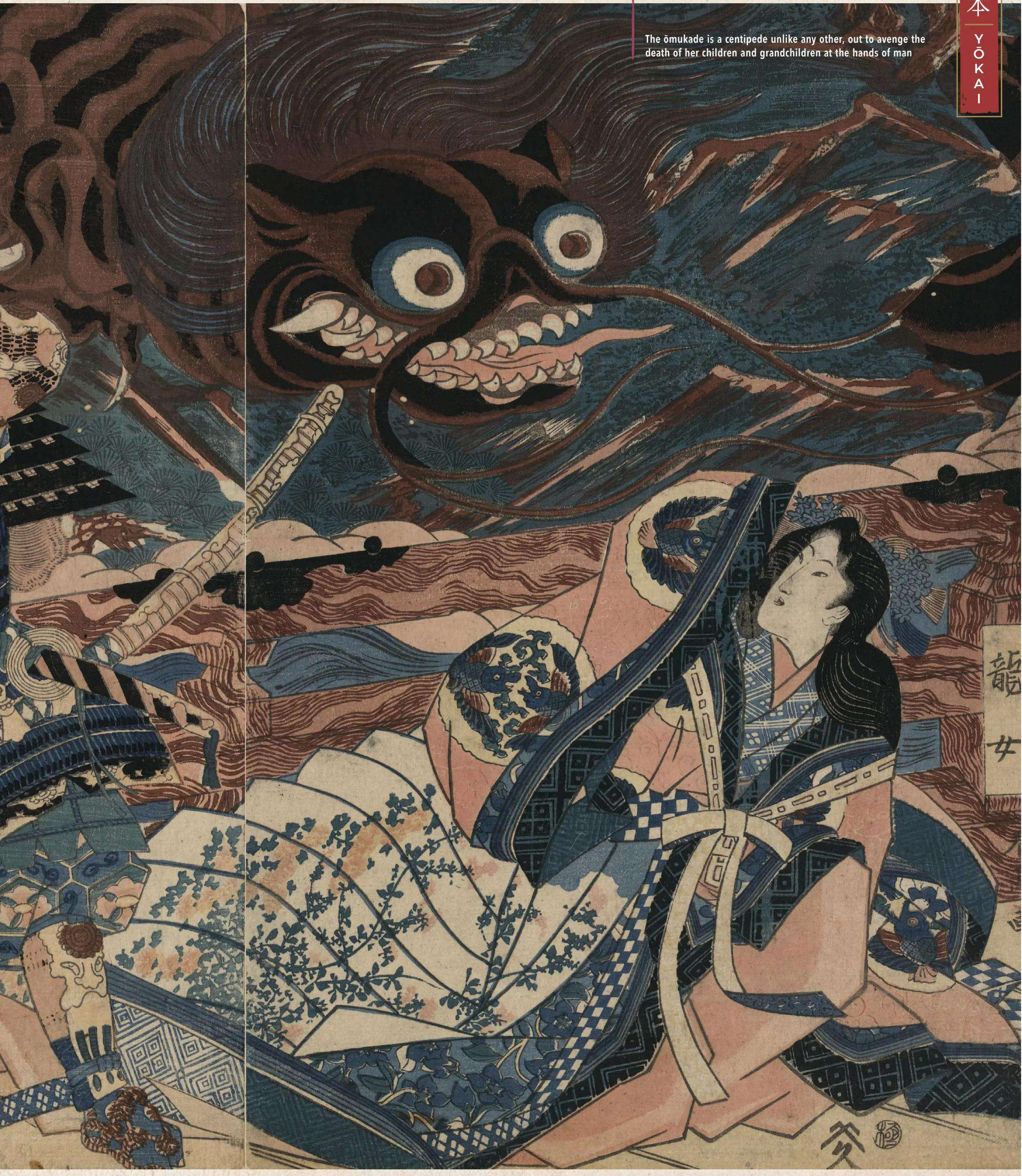
However, not all yōkai originated in an unknown and mystical place. Some yōkai, such as yasaburō, began as humans before becoming yōkai after death, then progressing to the heights of deity. Depending on the story and the person telling it, some beings might be gods to some and yōkai to others.

A HISTORY OF YŌKAI

In the earliest versions of Japanese myths, spirits and other mischievous entities were often regarded as invisible and without physical shape. However, for those who did inhabit a physical body, descriptions often reflected a religious idea of a demon, with yōkai that bore horns and monstrous fangs. Yet yōkai didn't remain as devilish creatures and soon encompassed a range of creatures.

Once artists began to illustrate these ancient myths, it became necessary to find some way to visually represent the vast cast of creatures that could be found in them. Now the yōkai began to take shape alongside written stories, often in exquisite scroll paintings, kept in temples or owned by the rich. They were not open to a wide audience at all. Featured in these early illustrations might be a monstrous regiment of yōkai such as those depicted in the *Hyakki Yagyō Emaki*, or *Night Parade* of

"THESE SPIRITS WERE OFTEN BLAMED FOR UNLUCKY PHENOMENA"

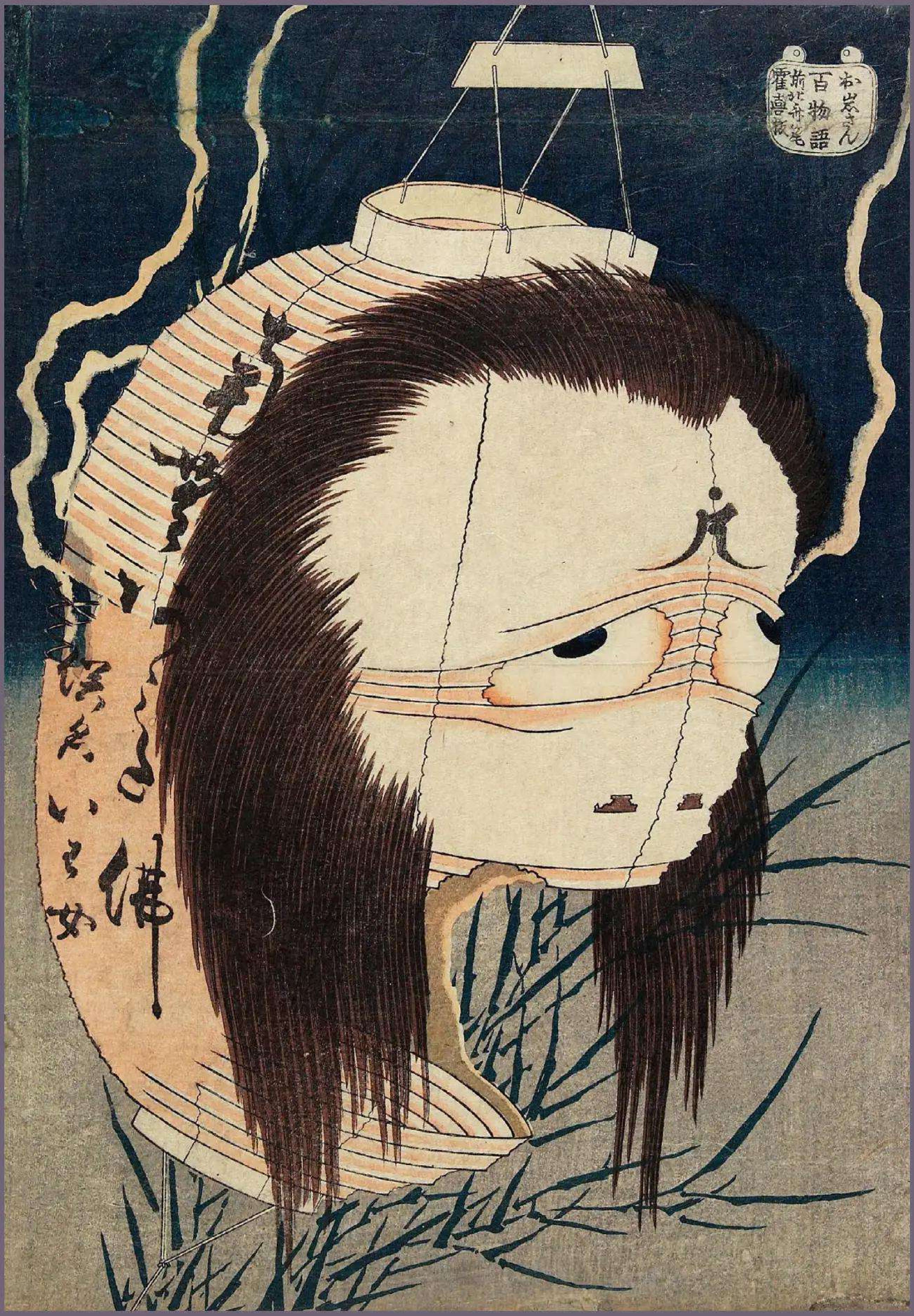


The ōmukade is a centipede unlike any other, out to avenge the death of her children and grandchildren at the hands of man

THE OBAKE

THESE MISCHIEVOUS SPIRITS HAVE UNDERGONE A TRANSFORMATION

Obake literally means a thing that changes – and in the realm of yōkai, it refers to spirits that have shapeshifted or undergone a transformation. However, these spirits are not the ghosts of those who once lived. Obake can assume many forms, from animal to humanoid to household objects and, unlike some yōkai, they pose little threat to humans, preferring mischievous pranks to wicked deeds. Whilst an obake might give you a fright, it won't do you any lasting harm.


お岩さん
百物語
新板御化尽
霍亭

Shunkosai Hokuei Obake, by Katsushika Hokusai. It depicts a ghost that has taken on the form of a lantern

a Hundred Demons, in which yōkai march through the streets by night in search of human victims. They also sought tsukumogami on their hunt: everyday objects, particularly tools, that, once reaching a century old, became inhabited by a shapeshifting spirit.

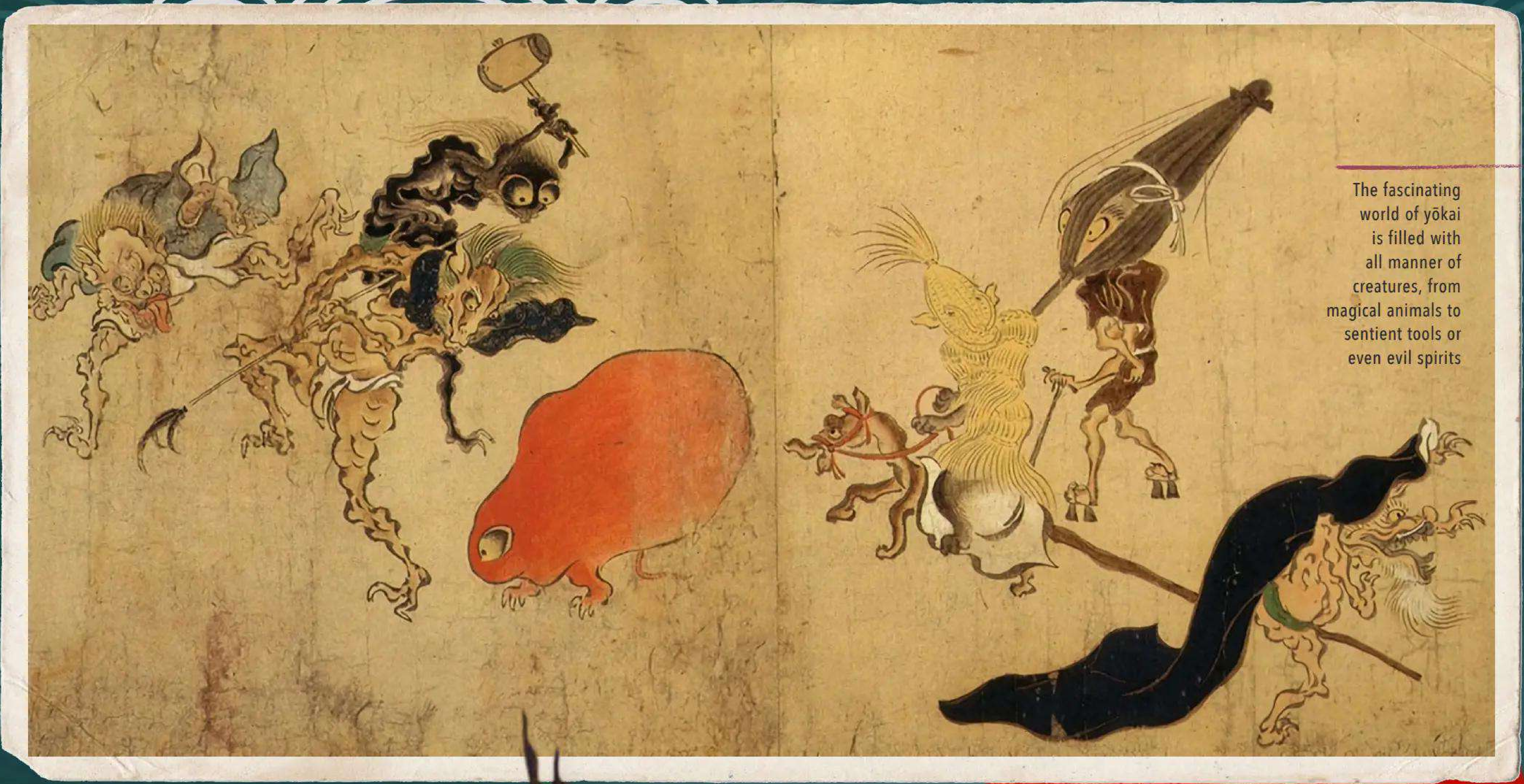
In Japanese history, yōkai were beings to be feared and respected and few dared to trifle with them. With stories being passed down through generations (initially verbally and later in writing and illustration), they were known in every class and every part of the country. In the Edo period, artistic representations particularly flourished – this was a time when tales of ghosts and monsters became accepted almost as part of everyday life. With the development of woodblock prints in this era, prints depicting yōkai could now be seen by all classes and soon they were a cultural phenomenon.

In the 18th century, artist and scholar Toriyama Sekien produced his bestiary, *Gazu Hyakki Yagyō, The Illustrated Night Parade of a Hundred Demons*, a series of illustrated encyclopedias about the yōkai, collecting together oral folktales of rural Japan. Sekien's multi-volume work managed to bring these creatures of legend vividly to life for the urbanites, whose appetite for yōkai flourished until the modern age. Inspired by his work and the market for the supernatural, artists added their own creatures to the mix, creating a rich vein of new myth. Few works on the yōkai can boast that they have been as influential as those of Sekien, whose masterworks provide the template for yōkai study to this very day.

With the coming of the technological age, the yōkai's reign of terror seemed to be over. Seen as relics of a superstitious past, they fell from favour and the hunger for tales of the yōkai seemed to be over. However, the yōkai made a comeback in 1960 thanks to manga artist Shigeru Mizuki, whose comic series, *GeGeGe no Kitarō*, brought them thundering back into the mainstream. From then on, they have reassumed their power, carving out a place in all aspects of Japanese entertainment culture, from horror movies to *Pokémon*, not to mention online discussion of whether anthropomorphic bunny Hello Kitty and her ilk can be considered a yōkai.

ANIMAL YŌKAI

Regardless of the era from which a yōkai first emerged, many animals are traditionally associated as yōkai in Japanese culture. Among them are the turtle, who are represented as yōkai through the stories of Kame hime, the reclusive turtle princess of Inawashiro (Turtle) Castle, or the hōnengame,



The fascinating world of yōkai is filled with all manner of creatures, from magical animals to sentient tools or even evil spirits

turtles with the horned head of human women, who are able to make prophecies and predict the future. Their image is believed to be a talisman against evil and illness.

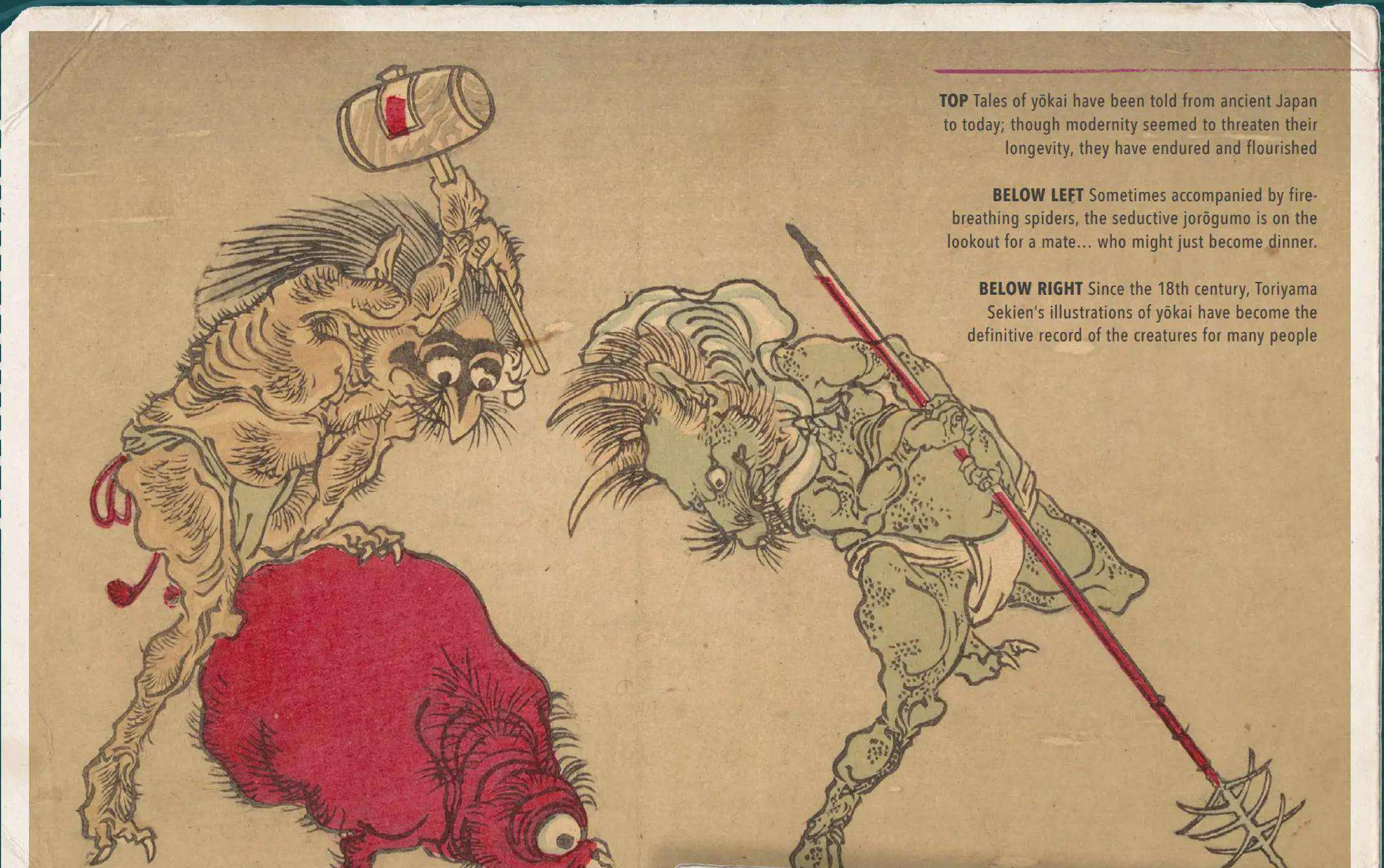
Tsuru nyōbō are cranes who assume the form of beautiful women and marry men who have shown them kindness; similar tales exist of animal wives and husbands including shapeshifting frogs, foxes, and more. Cranes are also a central part of Shinto lore, in the form of yaotome, eight cranes who carry the ceremonial handbells in their unusually hairy feet.

Among the other animal yōkai are kawauso, shapeshifting river otters who love to drink sake and play mischievous, but not malevolent, tricks on humans. They have a talent for mimicry and use it to prank unsuspecting victims, sometimes even shapeshifting into beautiful women in order to seduce young men. Once the men are in their seductive spell, they leave them high and dry as they run away laughing!

Not all animal yōkai are harmless pranksters though. Perhaps unsurprisingly, centipede and spider yōkai carry negative connotations and Japanese folklore is home to the jorōgumo, a shapeshifting bloodsucker of a spiderwoman who has also lent her name to a species of spider, the joro. Just as the joro eats her mate, the jorōgumo is able to shapeshift into the form of a human woman.

Many animals are associated with the mysterious world of the yōkai, from fearsome and gigantic creepy crawlies to the elegant crane

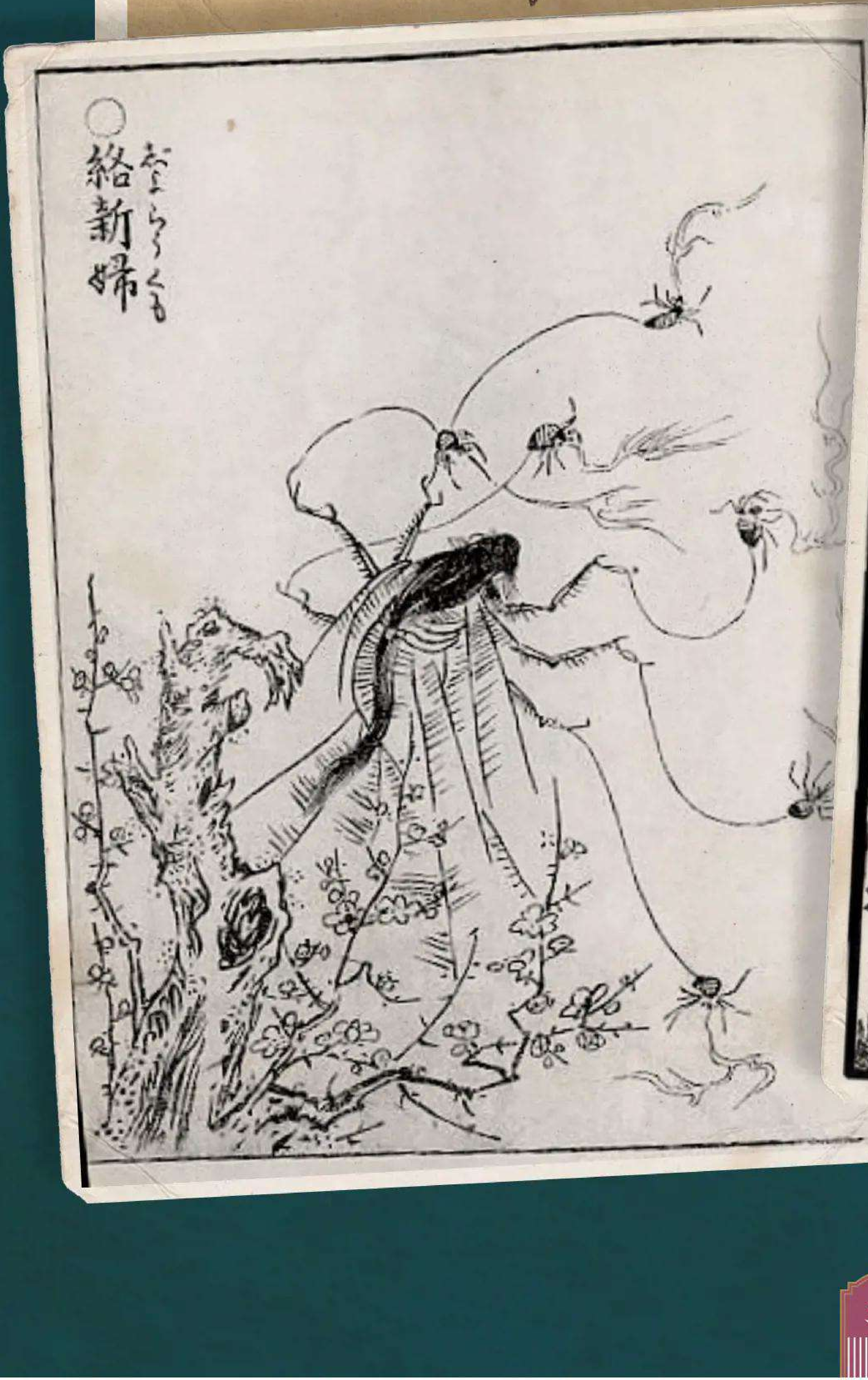
"THE YOKAI MADE A COMEBACK IN 1960 THANKS TO MANGA ARTIST SHIGERU MIZUKI"

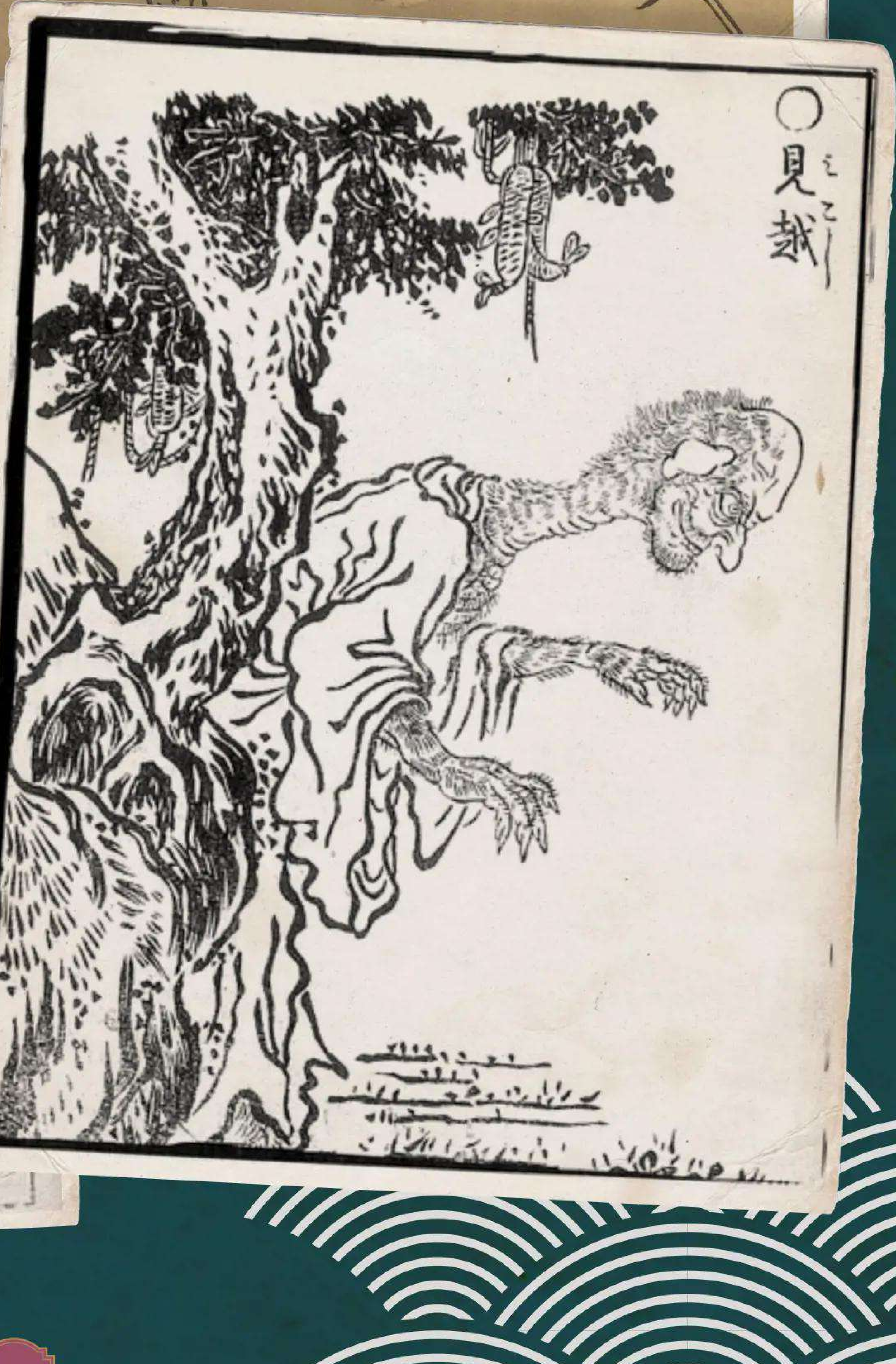


TOP Tales of yōkai have been told from ancient Japan to today; though modernity seemed to threaten their longevity, they have endured and flourished

BELOW LEFT Sometimes accompanied by fire-breathing spiders, the seductive jorōgumo is on the lookout for a mate… who might just become dinner.

BELOW RIGHT Since the 18th century, Toriyama Sekien's illustrations of yōkai have become the definitive record of the creatures for many people





Local folklore tells that at the Jōren Falls in Izu, a traveller was resting when a jorōgumo tried to ensnare him in her web and drag him into the falls. Another version of the tale has a woodcutter fall in love with a beautiful woman he met at the waterfall. Luckily, a local Buddhist priest suspected that she was actually a shapeshifter, out to enchant the woodcutter. However, despite learning that his beloved was really a monstrous spiderwoman, the woodcutter still sought to marry her and eventually found himself caught by webbing and dragged into the water to meet his fate.

Jorōgumo have proved to hold an enduring fascination, making appearances in Japanese and western fiction for decades. This popular yōkai has even done battle with the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*; it seems that she will always live to fight another day.

Less common in Western lore are the giant centipede yōkai of Japanese myth, the ōmukade. These yōkai are notable for their enormous size and are often portrayed with dragon-like facial features in illustrations. Ōmukade are extremely aggressive and their almost invulnerable exoskeleton means that they fear nothing, not even dragons. However, the giant centipede has one unexpected weakness: the touch of human saliva is highly poisonous to them.

One of these man-eating creatures was supposedly killed near Lake Biwa by a samurai known as "Rice Bag Tōda", who was attacked by an ōmukade who sought revenge for the death of her children and grandchildren at the samurai's hands. Tōda was only able to kill the beast when he wet the head of an arrow with his own saliva.

The heirs to these animal yōkai myths are kaiju, the giant monsters of folklore and, more recently, entertainment. Whilst the likes of Godzilla and King Kong are not yōkai and have no exact contemporary in yōkai folklore, one can certainly see their forebears in the likes of the monstrous ōmukade.

THE FUTURE OF YŌKAI

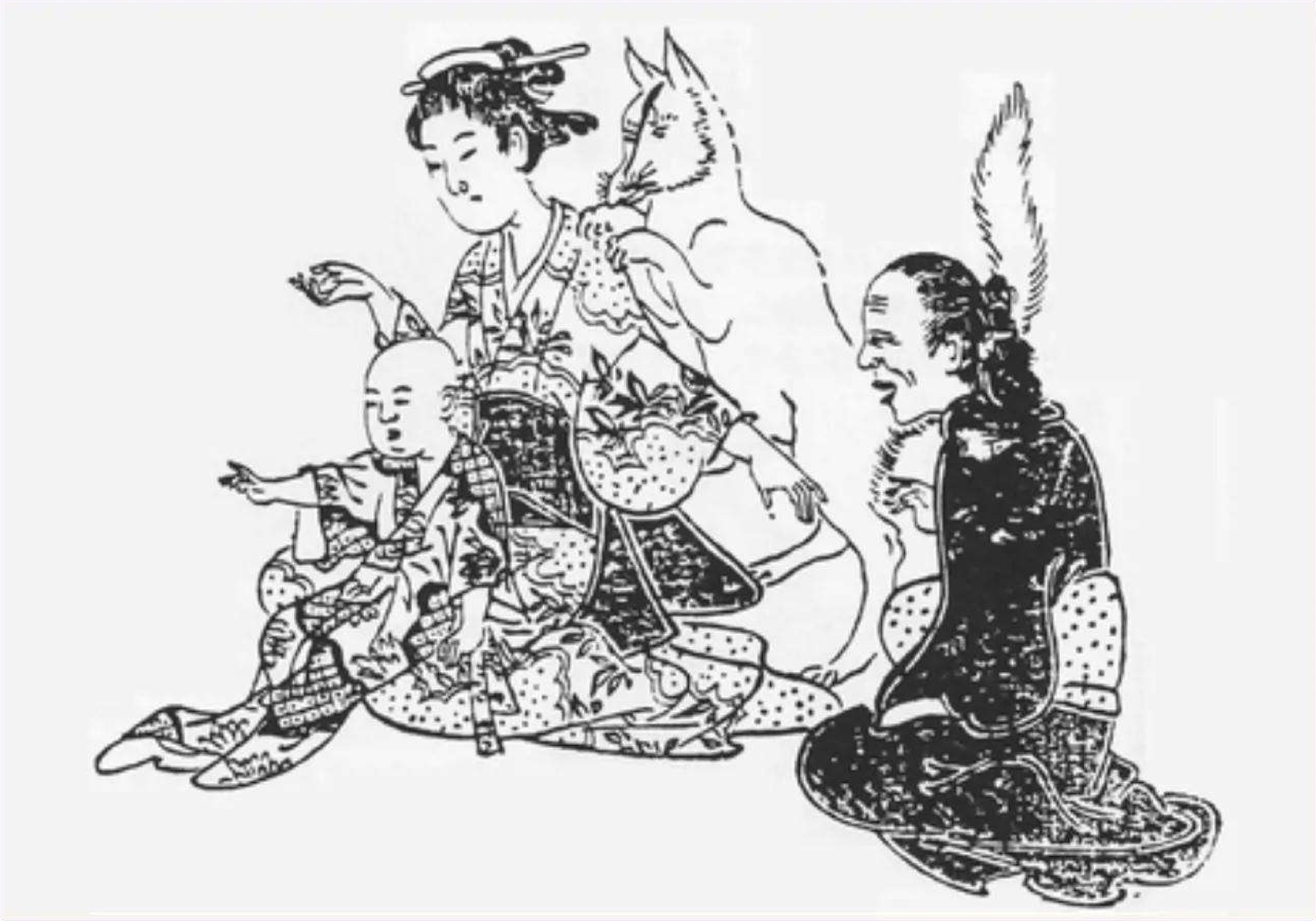
Though the modern era seemed to spell the end of the yōkai's grip on Japanese myth, it was not to be. The creatures encompass such a wide range of species and types that they can't be compartmentalised and whether devil, god, animal, monster or something else entirely, they continue to frighten, fascinate and inspire. The explosion in the popularity of manga proved to be a perfect showcase for the yōkai. Works which incorporate these, such as the animated films of Studio Ghibli, have captured imaginations across the world (see page 44), whilst manga are consumed in every corner of the globe. Thanks to the proliferation of Japanese media, the creatures known as yōkai are now woven throughout international culture and enjoy a rich influence.

Whilst early yōkai stories began in folklore, today they may emerge from fiction or even urban legend. Far from fading into obscurity, they have enjoyed a new popularity, which looks set to continue. With new yōkai being created to join those who have come from ancient myth, it seems as though these creatures of legend are here to stay.

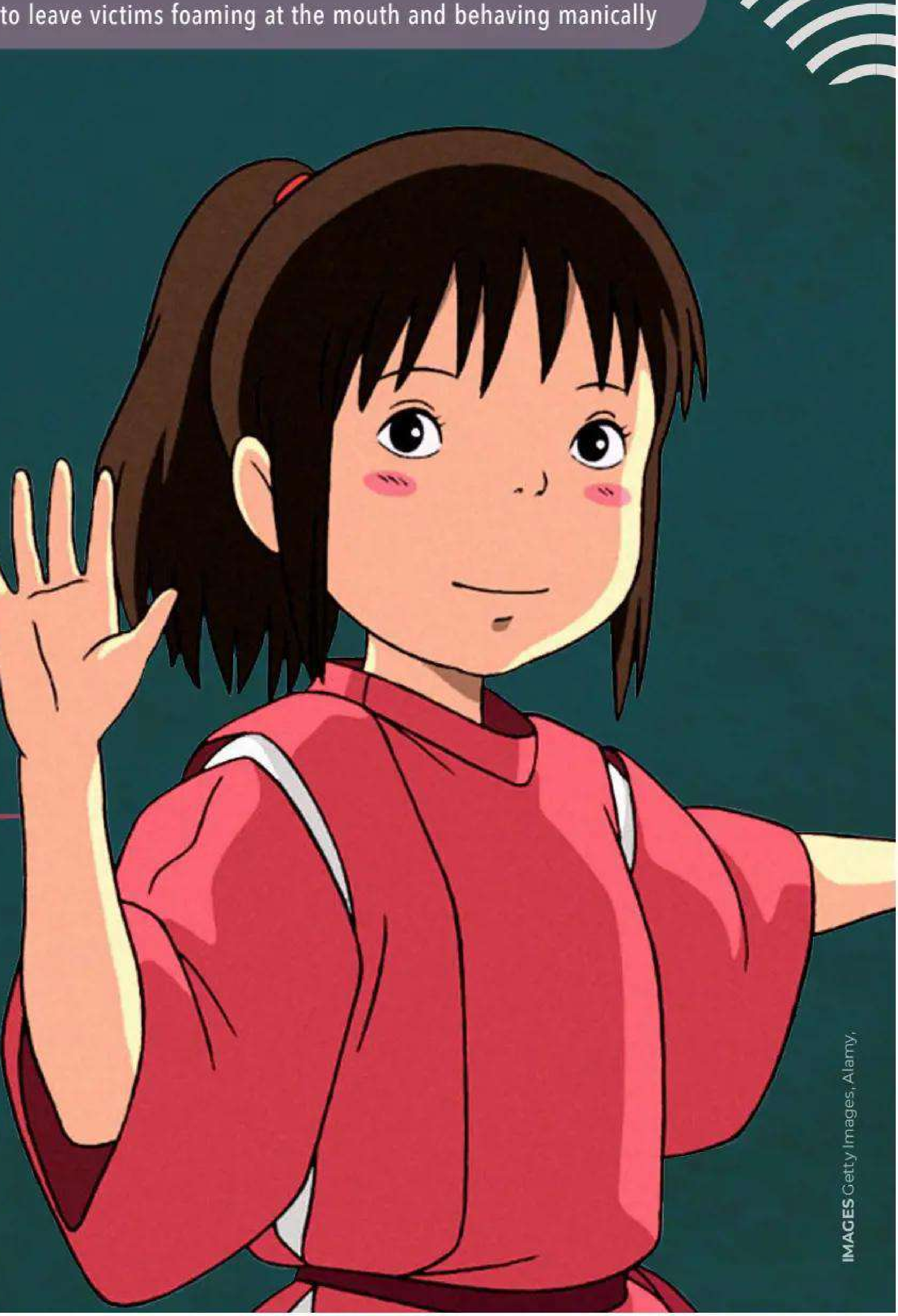
THE TSUKIMONO

THESE EVIL, POSSESSING SPIRITS ARE ON THE HUNT FOR VICTIMS

Tsukimono are yōkai who possess unsuspecting and unwilling human victims. Sometimes animal spirits, tsukimono are often created when the human does the spirit a harm of some kind, such as destroying its habitat or killing its children. Sometimes, however, it's simply that the creature can only get something that it wants in human form, so needs a body to possess in order to achieve its goals. Victims will begin to mimic the attributes of the possessing yōkai and can only be freed from their ordeal by the intervention of an exorcist.



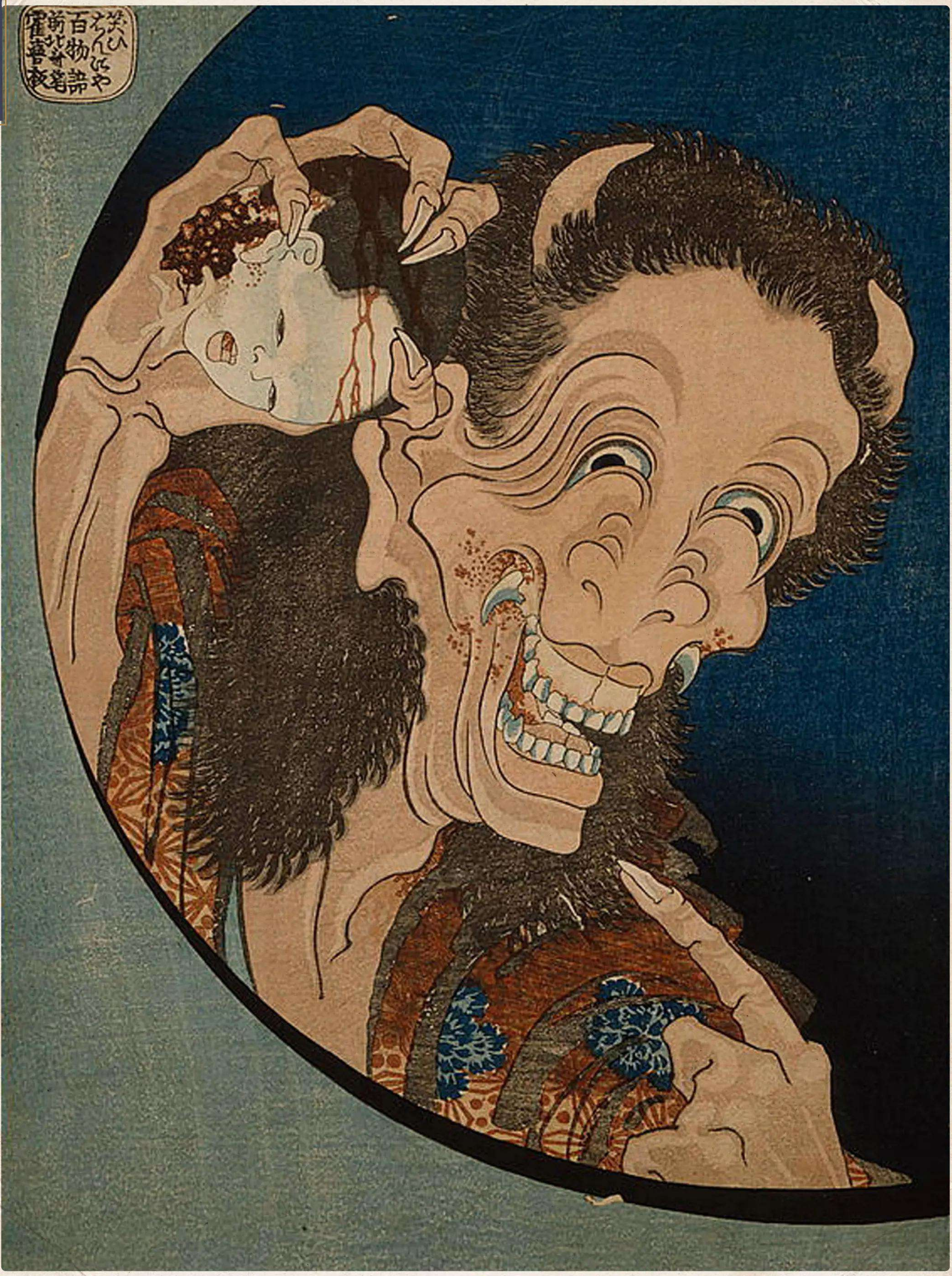
Kitsunetsuki refers to possession by fox yōkai, which was believed to leave victims foaming at the mouth and behaving manically



Modern audiences have been introduced to the yōkai through works like the beloved movies of Japan's celebrated Studio Ghibli

"TODAY THEY MAY EMERGE FROM FICTION OR EVEN URBAN LEGEND"

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy.


笑ひはんにや
百物語
前北斎為一筆

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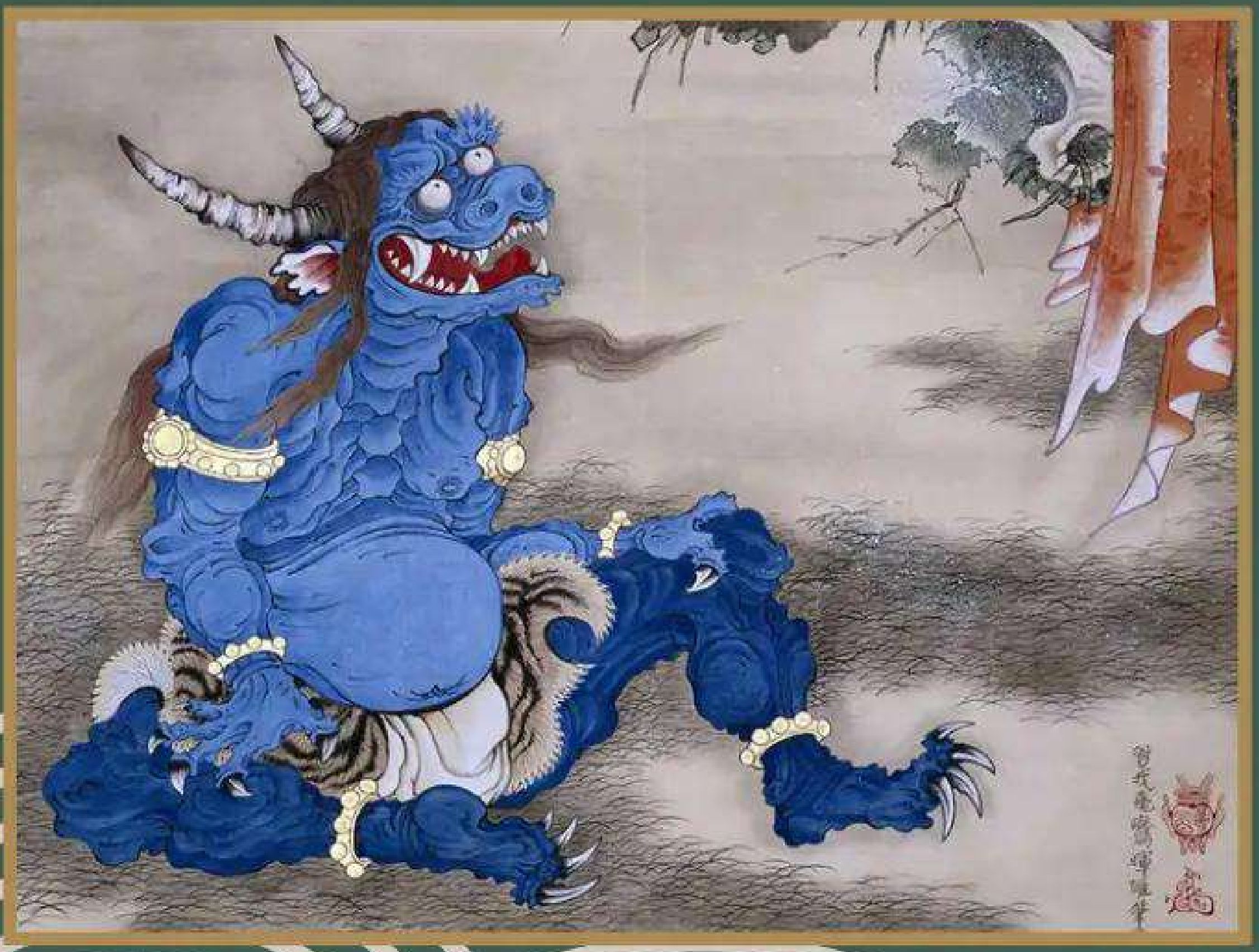
THE KANABO WIELDING ONI

THESE MONSTROUS CREATURES ARE KNOWN THROUGHOUT JAPAN BUT MOST LIKELY ORIGINATED IN CHINA AND ENTERED THE JAPANESE CONSCIOUSNESS ALONG WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF BUDDHISM

WRITTEN BY **JOANNA ELPHICK**

Huge demonic monsters, known collectively as 'yokai oni', are said to lurk behind bushes and rocks, ready to cause trouble to unwary travellers. Other oni stand at the gates of hell, or Jigoku, taunting and harassing those sinners destined for the underworld. Their appearance is remarkably similar to that of a European troll or smelly ogre commonly found skulking beneath dilapidated bridges in children's fairy tales, with long, straggly hair, wickedly sharp claws, and large gaping mouths full of razor teeth. Some have multiple horns protruding from their heads whilst others make do with one solitary spike, jutting out towards the sky. All are grotesquely ugly despite their beautiful gaudy colouring of blue, pink, red, green or white.

A typical painting of a blue Japanese oni with his sharp teeth, claws and horns



As with the European troll frequently depicted swinging a wooden cudgel, oni are often portrayed carrying a spiked, iron-coated war club, known as a kanabo, used by the samurai across feudal Japan. By brandishing a kanabo in one hand, the demon-like oni can display their mythical strength and intimidate those unfortunate enough to cross their path, acting as maniacal bullies as they wriggle their extra fingers and toes in a menacing fashion.

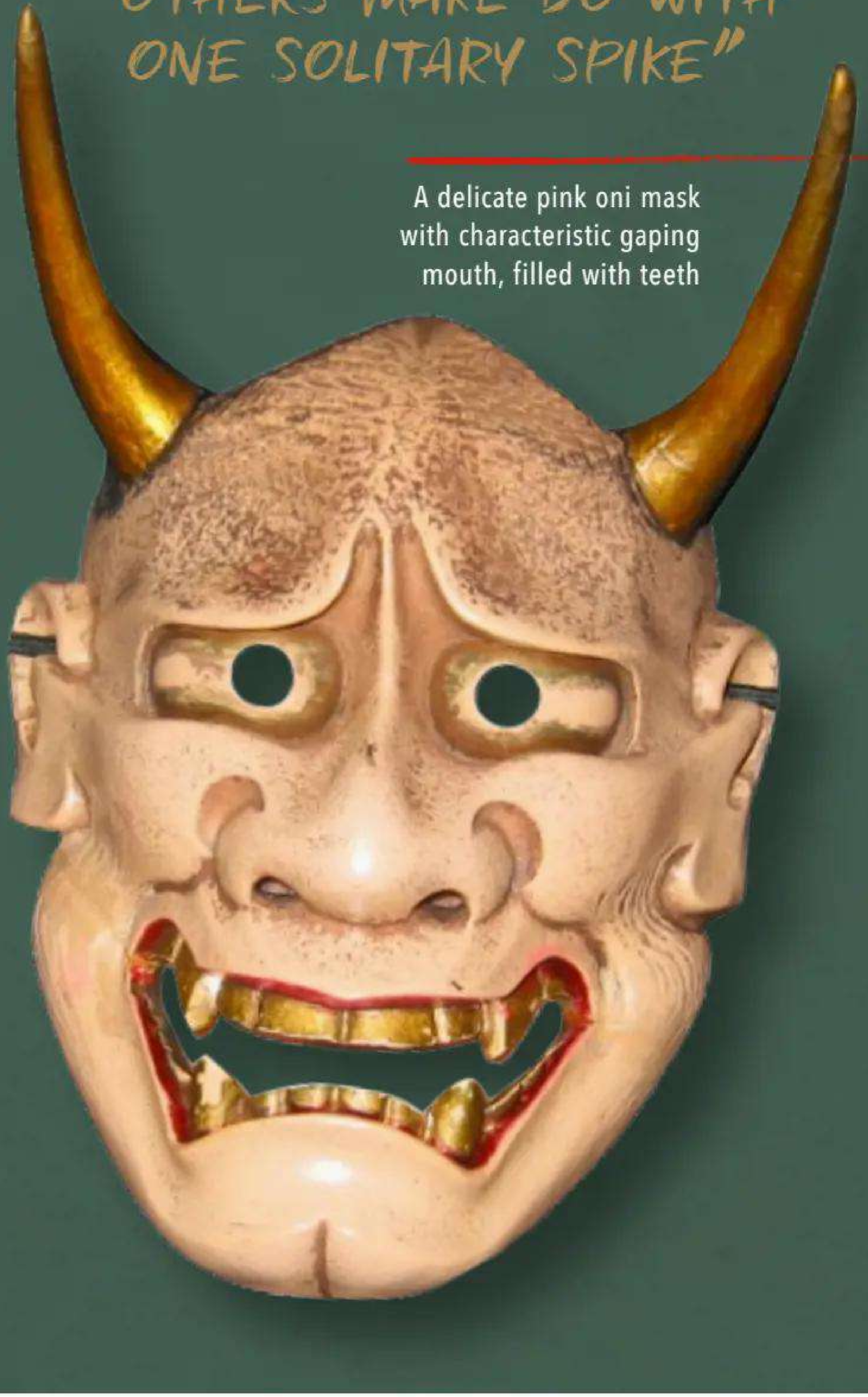
In Japanese art, oni tend to be represented naked except for a loincloth made of tiger-skin, the tatty pelt dangling between their fat legs. Occasionally, oni are shown wearing the long, dusty robes of a pilgrim or wandering Buddhist monk but these, less vicious creatures, are far rarer. The arms, wrists and ankles are sometimes adorned with golden bangles to highlight their power and importance, but nothing can detract from the overall hideousness of their visage.

The origin of oni is not clear but many believe that those people so wicked in life that they are considered beyond redemption become oni when their evil souls escape their mortal bodies. Such creatures dwell in the fiery pits of hell. Some people are so utterly monstrous that they transform into oni whilst still alive and here, the creatures stay on Earth to terrorise the villagers.

Other oni, usually of the red variety, are thought to be less depraved and can appear in the form of a kindly ancestral spirit who wants to befriend humans. Such creatures are seen as protective rather than fiendish, and their image is sometimes used to repel bad luck. Just as the gargoyle protects churches in Europe, roof tiles depicting an ugly oni face, can sometimes be spotted on Japanese buildings.

> "SOME HAVE MULTIPLE HORNS PROTRUDING FROM THEIR HEADS WHILST OTHERS MAKE DO WITH ONE SOLITARY SPIKE"

A delicate pink oni mask with characteristic gaping mouth, filled with teeth



THE DECEPTIVE YAMANBA

JAPAN'S YAMANBA ARE MOUNTAIN-DWELLING WITCHES WHO LOST THEIR HUMANITY AND WERE TRANSFORMED INTO SUPERNATURAL BEINGS

WRITTEN BY **KATE CHERRELL**

Yamanba are curious figures and go by many names, including yamamba and yamauba. Considered to be yōkai, they closely resemble Western fairytale witches and old crones; solitary women living in isolation, poised to curse any unfortunate traveller who comes too close to their dwelling. Demonic women, such as kijo and onibaba, are familiar characters in Japanese folklore – they are essentially ordinary women who have been corrupted and consequently transformed into supernatural beings.

WHAT MAKES A YAMANBA?

Yamanba are commonly depicted as kindly old ladies who offer food and shelter to weary travellers, poised to attack when their victim is at their most vulnerable. However, there are many variations within yamanba. While sinister old crones are commonplace, not all of these witches are old, with some appearing as beautiful young women, manifesting before hunters and deflecting their weapons with bare hands. Some yamanba are cannibalistic monsters with mouths atop their heads, while others are benevolent and bestow good fortune, operating as positive spirits or household gods.

> "YAMANBA ARE COMMONLY DEPICTED AS KINDLY OLD LADIES WHO OFFER FOOD AND SHELTER TO WEARY TRAVELLERS"

FOLK TALES

One of the most prominent yamanba stories in Japanese folklore is that of *Kuwazu Nyōbō*, or *The Wife Who Didn't Eat*. In this tale, a hard-working but miserly coal miner was approached by a beautiful woman who promised to work hard and eat nothing, if only he would marry her. The man agreed and soon believed that he had the best wife in the world. However, a curious neighbour peered through the windows and saw the wife cooking enormous amounts of food. Suddenly, she turned to him with the face of a snake, and he fled in terror. The next day, the neighbour convinced the miner to spy on his wife and see exactly who – or what – he had married. Peering through the window, he saw his wife cooking, before letting down her hair to reveal an enormous mouth on top of her head. Tricking his wife, he led her down to the riverbank where, upon entering a field of wormwood, she revealed her true serpent identity and slithered away.

FRIENDLY BEINGS

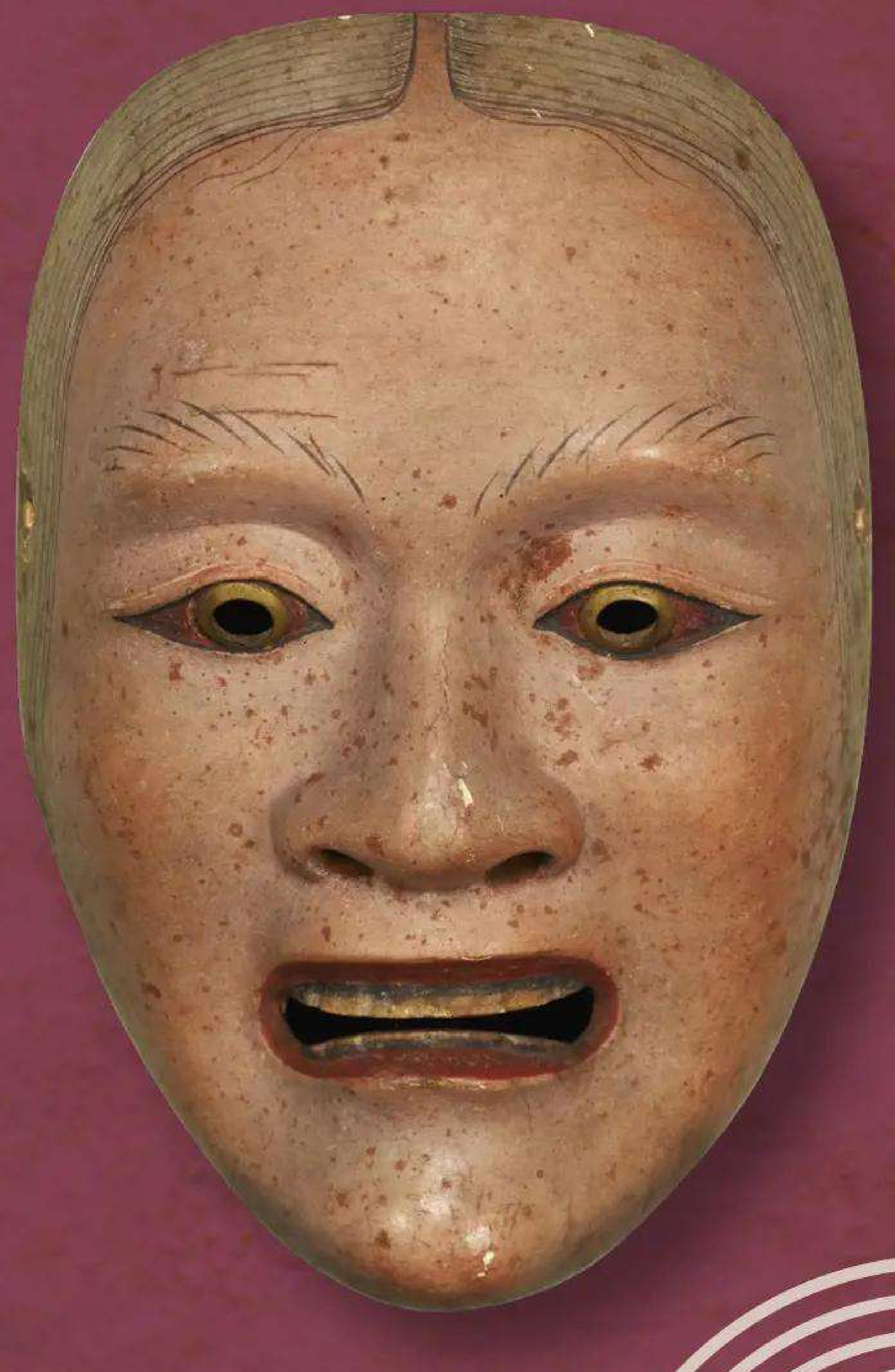
A benevolent yamanba was said to live In Shizuoaka, taking the form of a kindly woman. Wearing clothes of tree bark, she helped families by producing large amounts of rice from just a few cups.

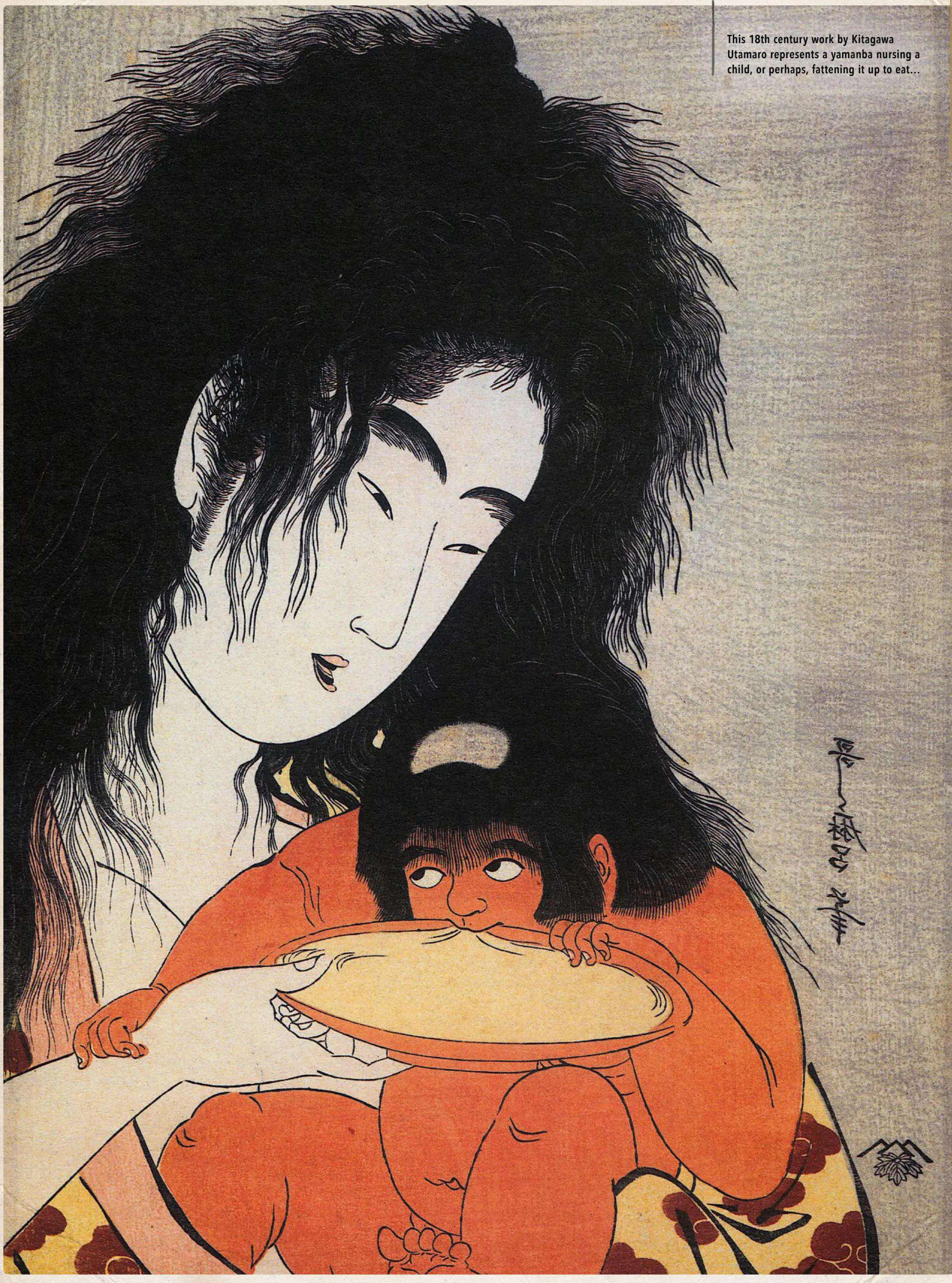
Other variations of the yamanba are said to lend neighbours tools and resources and even help lost children, feeding them and leading them to safety.

WARNING SIGNS

In Kagawara prefecture, river-dwelling yamanbas are known as 'kawajoro' and operate as early-warning systems for floods. Much like a wailing banshee, this old yamanba is known for her loud voice, which shrieks in terror that her house is about to be washed away. It's believed that she does so when a body of water is about to overflow its banks.

The role of yamanba appears within traditional Noh plays, where masks are worn as part of a dance performance





This 18th century work by Kitagawa Utamaro represents a yamanba nursing a child, or perhaps, fattening it up to eat…

IMAGES Getty Images; WIKI Public Domain Soga Suminobo

SOOT GREMLINS AND FOREST SPIRITS

HOW STUDIO GHIBLI BROUGHT JAPANESE FOLKLORE – AND ITS RESPECT FOR NATURE – TO THE INTERNATIONAL SCREEN

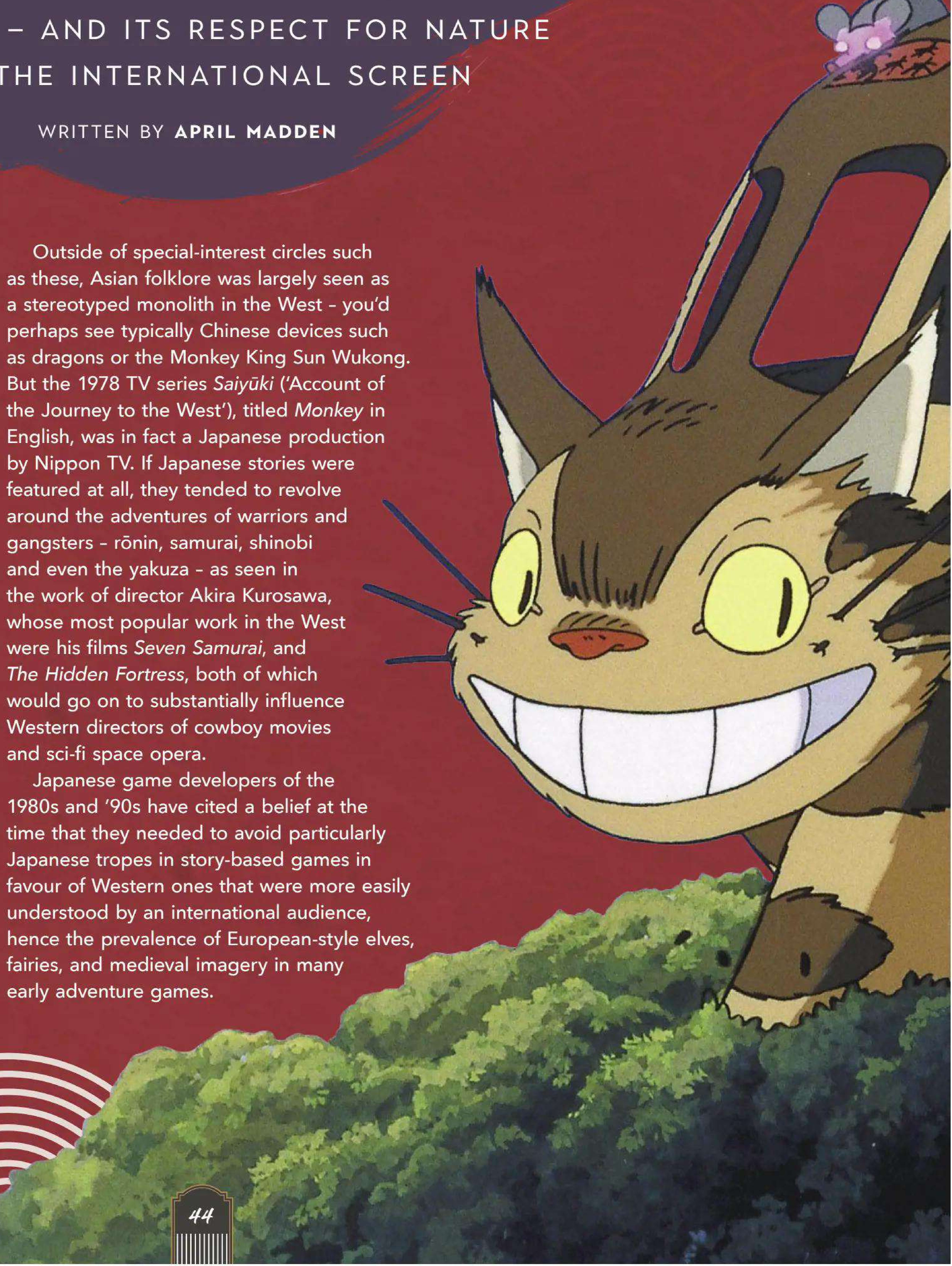
WRITTEN BY **APRIL MADDEN**

In the 1980s, much of Japanese folklore was obscure to most people in the West. Those with an academic interest might have read the work of Lafcadio Hearn, who in the 19th century brought many Japanese legends to Western readers - but they could have just as easily approached his work as horror fans, his collection of ghost stories, *Kwaidan*, having given rise to a 1964 horror movie of the same name.

The robot from 1986's *Laputa (Castle In The Sky)* wows fans at the Ghibli Museum in Tokyo

Outside of special-interest circles such as these, Asian folklore was largely seen as a stereotyped monolith in the West - you'd perhaps see typically Chinese devices such as dragons or the Monkey King Sun Wukong. But the 1978 TV series *Saiyūki* ('Account of the Journey to the West'), titled *Monkey* in English, was in fact a Japanese production by Nippon TV. If Japanese stories were featured at all, they tended to revolve around the adventures of warriors and gangsters - rōnin, samurai, shinobi and even the yakuza - as seen in the work of director Akira Kurosawa, whose most popular work in the West were his films *Seven Samurai*, and *The Hidden Fortress*, both of which would go on to substantially influence Western directors of cowboy movies and sci-fi space opera.

Japanese game developers of the 1980s and '90s have cited a belief at the time that they needed to avoid particularly Japanese tropes in story-based games in favour of Western ones that were more easily understood by an international audience, hence the prevalence of European-style elves, fairies, and medieval imagery in many early adventure games.

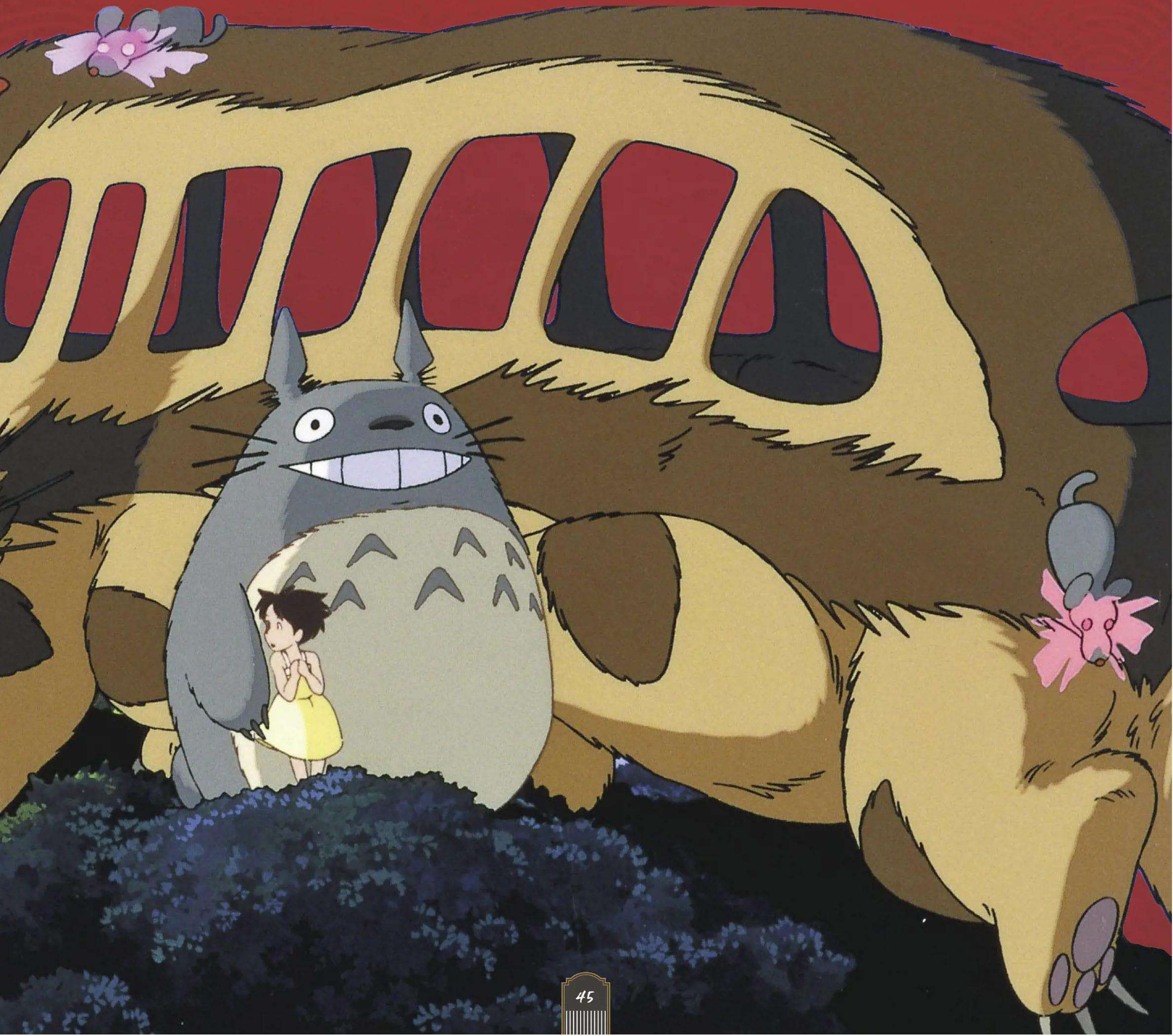


One anime studio would change all of that, headed by its stubborn, exacting founder. His insistence on telling precisely the stories he wishes to has – whether by accident or design – introduced the nuances of Japanese folklore to a wider international audience than ever before. The work of Hayao Miyazaki and his Studio Ghibli has provided a lavish introduction to Japanese folklore for generations of Westerners.

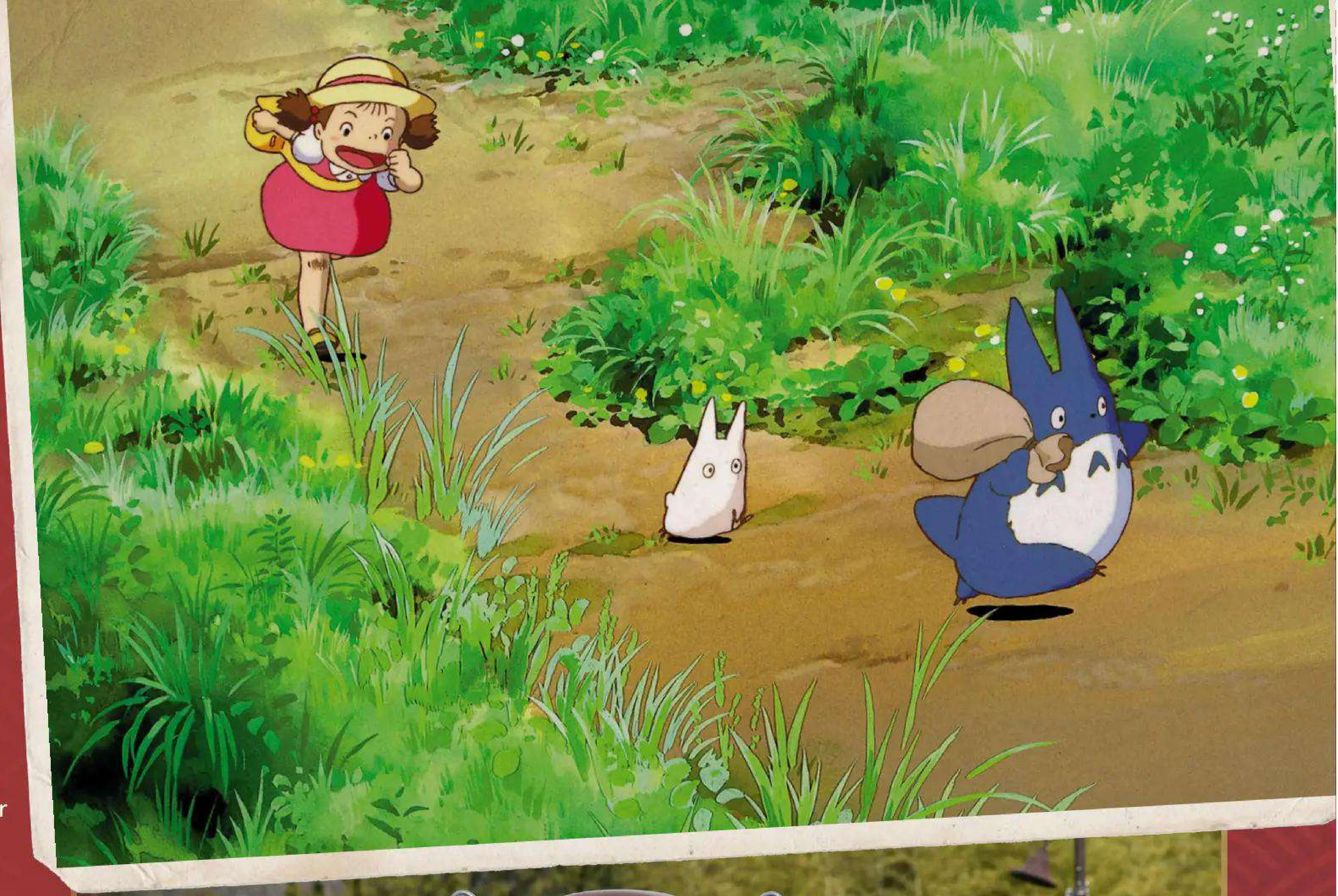
Not every Studio Ghibli film deals with or includes folkloric subjects. The studio's two earliest feature films, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind*, and *Castle in the Sky*, both have more of a sci-fi angle, although both centre a respect for nature that is at the heart of much Japanese folklore. It's Ghibli's third film that really starts to introduce an international audience to uniquely Japanese folklore.

THE KING OF THE FOREST

My Neighbor Totoro, 1988, was aimed at a wider age range than Studio Ghibli's previous movies, and unlike those, it's suitable even for young children. In it, city children Satsuki and Mei Kusakabe, aged around ten and four respectively, move to the countryside with their father Tatsuo in order to be closer to a hospital where their mother Yasuko is being treated for a long-term illness, possibly TB. On their way to their new home in the village of Matsugō, they pass a shrine dedicated to Inari, the kami who, often in fox-shape, watches over households, prosperity, and rice, which is cultivated in the fields around the village. As a city child, Satsuki is as unfamiliar with a countryside shrine as a Western viewer, allowing the idea of the immediate, ever-present and protective nature of Japanese kami to be gently introduced to an international audience.



Satsuki's respect for the nature spirits of her village means that they reward her with their friendship and assistance



Their new home itself has lain empty for some time, and as the old woman known as Granny who has been cleaning it for the family before they arrive greets the family, the viewer is introduced to the idea of akiya – the Japanese belief that abandoned homes are alive with the spirits of tsukumogami (see page 62). This too is gently done: Mei and Satsuki's new home isn't the haunt of ghosts, demons or haunted objects but of a fictional type of house spirit called susuwatari, known in the English subtitles and dubs of the movie as either soot sprites or soot gremlins. These grubby little dust bunnies will return 13 years later in Studio Ghibli's folkloric tour de force *Spirited Away*, but for now they scamper mischievously into corners and attics pursued by the girls until, satisfied that a good family with likeable children is moving into it, they scuttle out of the newly cleaned house and off into a landscape that clearly has more to it than meets the eye.

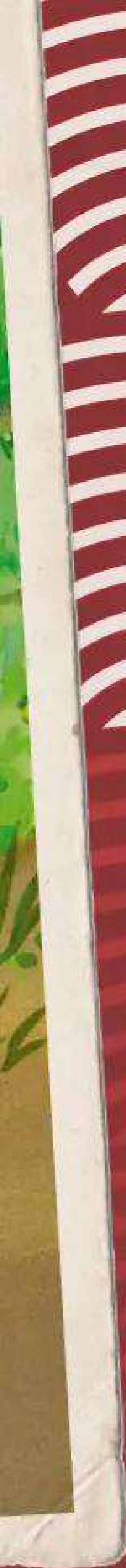
The girls' father is a professor; each day he sets off for his job at the university, and throughout the warm and lingering spring days – the film is set in May, the meaning of Satsuki's name and a homophone of Mei's – the two are able to explore their new world more fully. The viewer is introduced to the idea of Japanese forest spirits and sacred trees through Professor Kusakabe taking his daughters to pay their respects to a vast camphor tree on the edge of the village, which is revered as a guardian. Mei, lonely and frustrated while Satsuki is at school, needs constant distraction, and she soon finds this when she sees a small rabbit-like creature creeping through the grass of their long-untended garden. When she gives chase, the mysterious creature turns itself invisible and dashes away through a tangled hedge. Eventually Mei tracks the small creature through the hedge's twisting paths, which lead into the sacred woods ruled over by the camphor tree. In an enchanted hollow beneath its roots, she discovers the sleeping Totoro, a vast forest guardian who looks like a cross between a cat, an owl and a tanuki ('raccoon dog', an animal endemic to Japan and rich with its own folklore and myths); soft and cuddly and only a little scary. Despite her best efforts though, Mei is unable to show him to her disbelieving sister. It takes an incident of their father being late home during a rainstorm – small, but of concern enough to children – for Totoro to reveal himself to Satsuki. He does so at the bus stop where she is waiting for Tatsuo with his umbrella, which she gives to Totoro, who is ineffectually sheltering himself with a leaf. Totoro is waiting for transport of his own: Nekobasu or Catbus, a friendly, lorry-sized ginger tabby with 12 rushing legs and a furry bus for a body, showcasing the fluid mutability and adaptability of Japanese folklore. The Catbus is ostensibly a bake neko – a cat old enough to have gained magical powers and the ability to shapeshift. In Ghibli lore, this creature became intrigued by buses during its magical awakening and decided to transform itself into one. But it is also a tsukumogami on a grand, even municipal scale, embodying Japan's efficient, friendly public transport ethos. It extends that aspect of everyday life to the denizens of the spirit world as well as the human one (another theme that will later be picked up in *Spirited Away*).

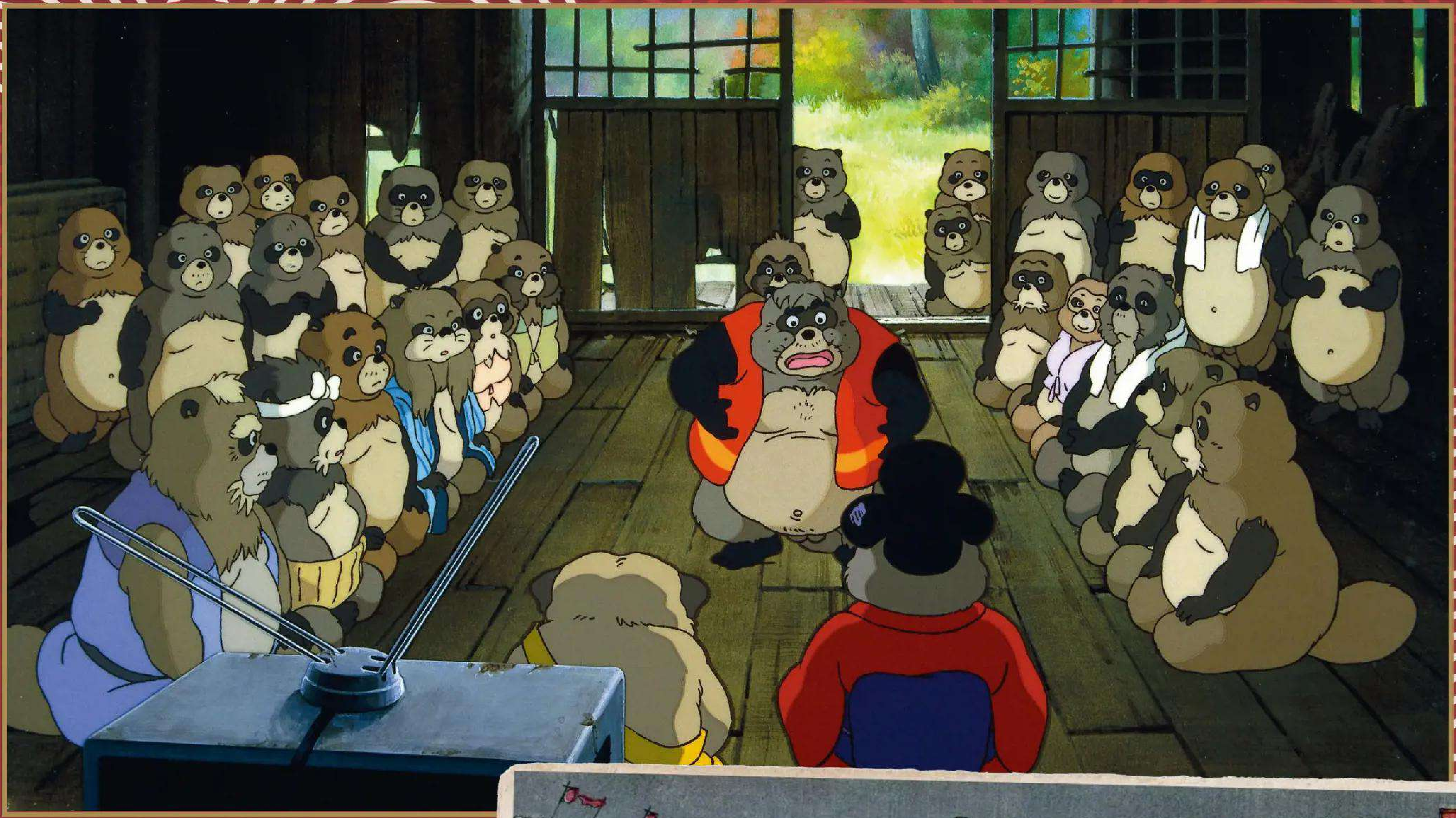
This much-welcomed gift finds the girls blessed by Totoro and the other spirit denizens of their country village. In exchange for the umbrella, Totoro gives Satsuki some seeds; shortly after sowing them, the girls awake one night to find Totoro and the two smaller spirits who accompany him (Oh-Totoro the large spirit, Chu-Totoro the medium-sized one, and the little white spirit Chibi-Totoro – known now, but not named in the film) performing a mysterious magical

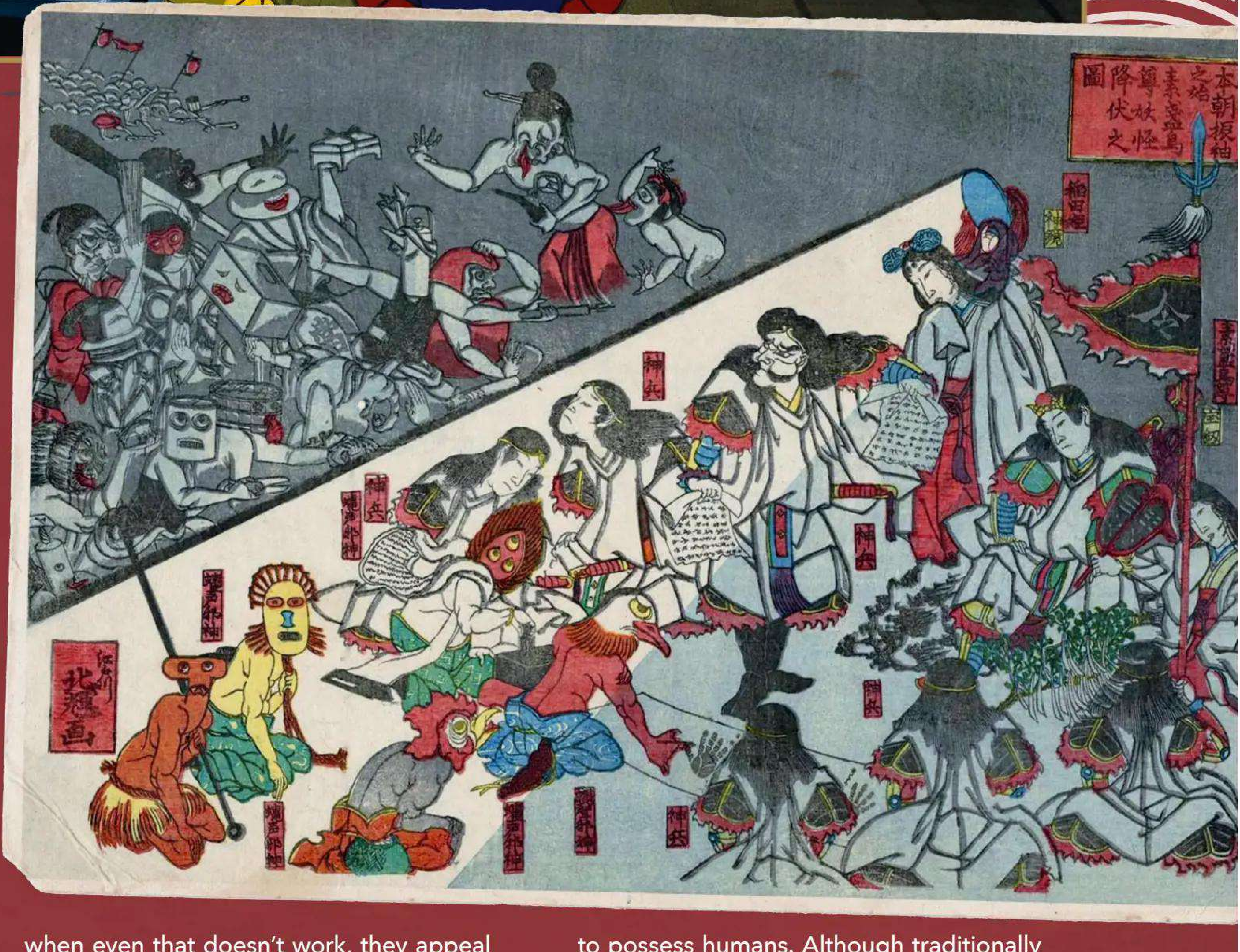
"NOT ALL OF GHIBLI'S NATURE SPIRITS ARE AS FRIENDLY AS TOTORO"

ABOVE TOP A country garden reveals some unexpected inhabitants in *My Neighbor Totoro*

ABOVE Life imitates art as fantasy folklore character Catbus becomes a reality as an electric vehicle







ABOVE *Pom Poko* features a group of shapeshifting tanuki who are desperate to stop human redevelopment of their forest home

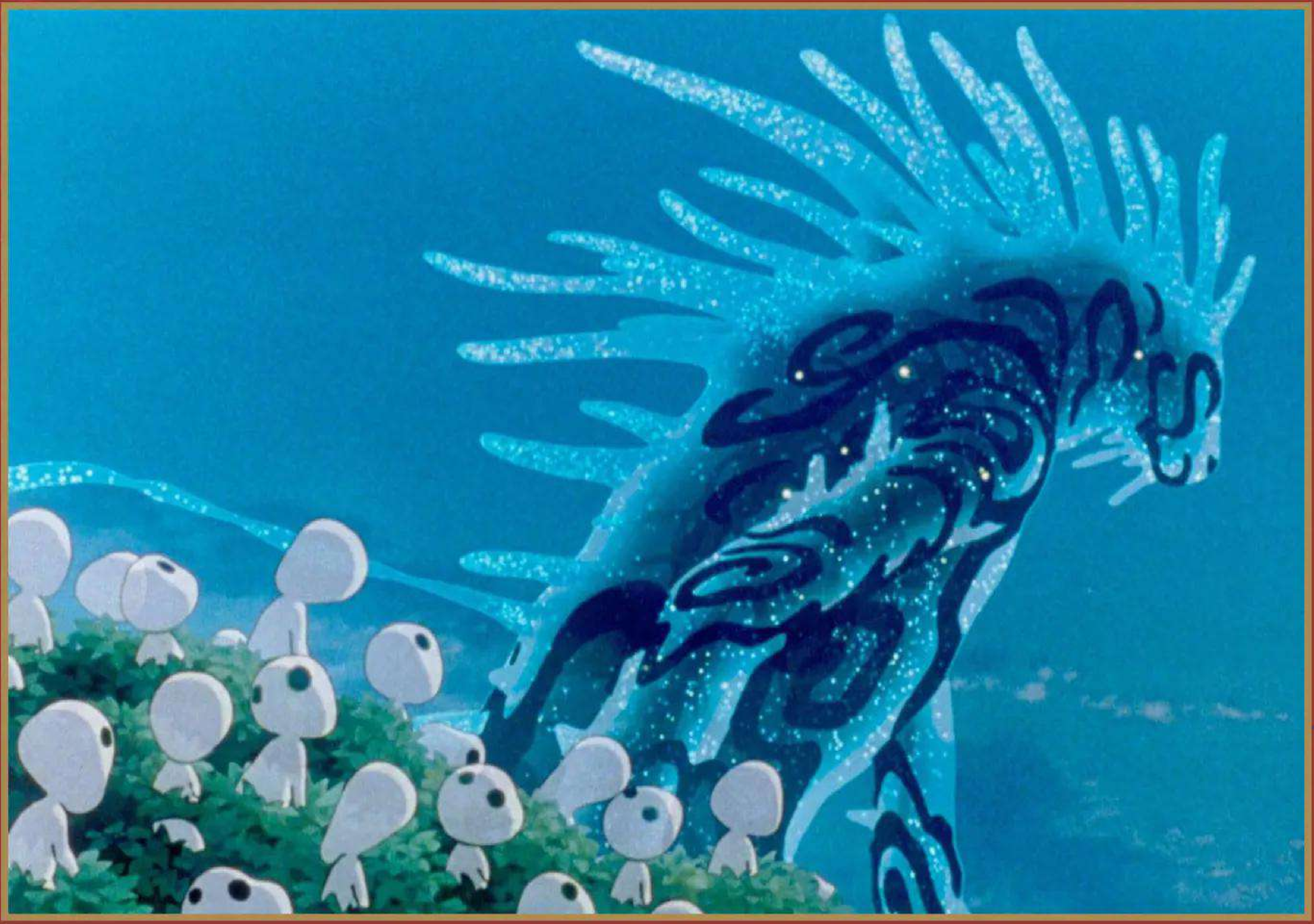
RIGHT In *Pom Poko* the tanuki attempt to terrify humans with a hyakki yagyō, or ghost parade of yōkai, a traditional concept from Japanese lore

dance around their newly planted flowerbed. Later, when Mei goes missing in the climactic incident of the film and the villagers turn out en masse to look for her, even dragging the village pond and finding, horribly, a child's sandal, Totoro and Catbus come to the rescue. They take Satsuki unerringly to where the runaway Mei, who is desperately trying to visit Yasuko in hospital, is sheltering in a roadside shrine to Kṣitigarbha. Aptly, this is a Buddhist bodhisattva considered to be the guardian of earth-spirits and children.

PEOPLE AND TREES USED TO BE FRIENDS

This theme of being kind to nature – for its own sake, but acknowledging that it will generally return the favour – is picked up in other Studio Ghibli movies. But not all of Ghibli's nature spirits are as gentle or friendly as Totoro. In *Pom Poko* (1994), the tanuki whose home is threatened by deforestation set out to remove human developers from their land in any way possible. Their sabotage against the human developers' industrial machinery hurts and even kills people. But when even that doesn't work, they appeal to fellow tanuki living on the smallest of Japan's four main islands for advice on how to proceed. Here, according to the plot, tanuki are still revered. In Japanese folklore, tanuki are bake-danuki; they can shapeshift and perform other magic, even having the ability to possess humans. Although traditionally their love of food and drink and merrymaking meant they were less of a threat than other yōkai, they are still formidable, with some bake-danuki sorcerers venerated as clan protectors and even lesser gods. In *Pom Poko* the tanuki stage ever-more dramatic

"GHIBLI SHOWED US A FOLKLORE OF REVERENCE TO THE NATURAL WORLD"

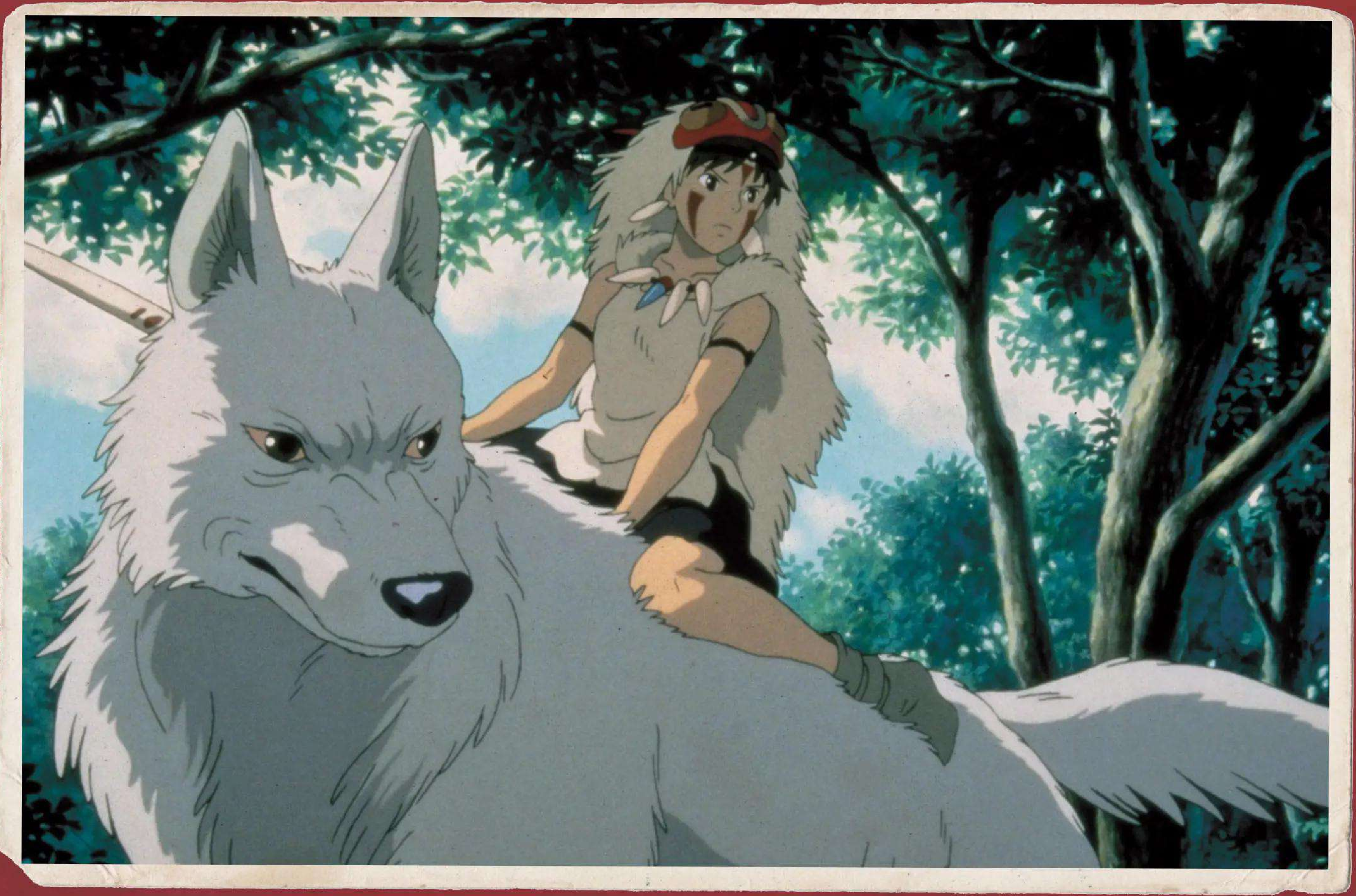


ghost parades and other illusions, but human redevelopment continues apace, until eventually the defeated tanuki who still can transform themselves into humans do so. One of these, Shoukichi, runs into his non-human friends at the end of the movie and joyfully rejoins them in a beautiful green space. Here, they discuss the need for humans, animals and the spirit world to leave peacefully and respectfully side by side. But as the camera pulls up and away the arcadian countryside scene is revealed to be a golf course.

1997's *Princess Mononoke* is even more explicit in embodying nature's rage against humanity's high-handed behaviour. Set in Japan's medieval past, the titular character, San ('mononoke' means 'forest spirit'), a human girl literally raised by wolves – specifically the wolf goddess Moro – is thrown into conflict against the human settlement of Irontown. When a cursed prince, Ashitaka, appears, trying to find the source of his

LEFT Some of Studio Ghibli's most famous films centre the forest spirits of Japanese folklore

BELOW Princess Mononoke is a human warrior who fights on behalf of the forest spirits of medieval Japan



misfortune, which is revealed to be an attack on the boar god by Irontown leader Lady Eboshi, the conflict worsens. Ashitaka, despite his curse, is helped by the tiny forest spirits known as kodama and even by the eerie Forest Spirit itself, but cannot prevent the forest denizens from attacking Irontown in their anger. Even the Forest Spirit itself transforms into the deadly Nightwalker, although this is not enough to prevent human retaliation, and it is killed by Lady Eboshi. San and Ashitaka eventually resolve the situation, but not before Irontown and the surrounding lands are destroyed. When San and Ashitaka return the Nightwalker's severed head to the Forest Spirit's sacred glade the land is renewed and blooms once more. Still, despite Irontown's repentance and Ashitaka's affection, San can't bring herself to forgive humanity for its wrongs against nature.

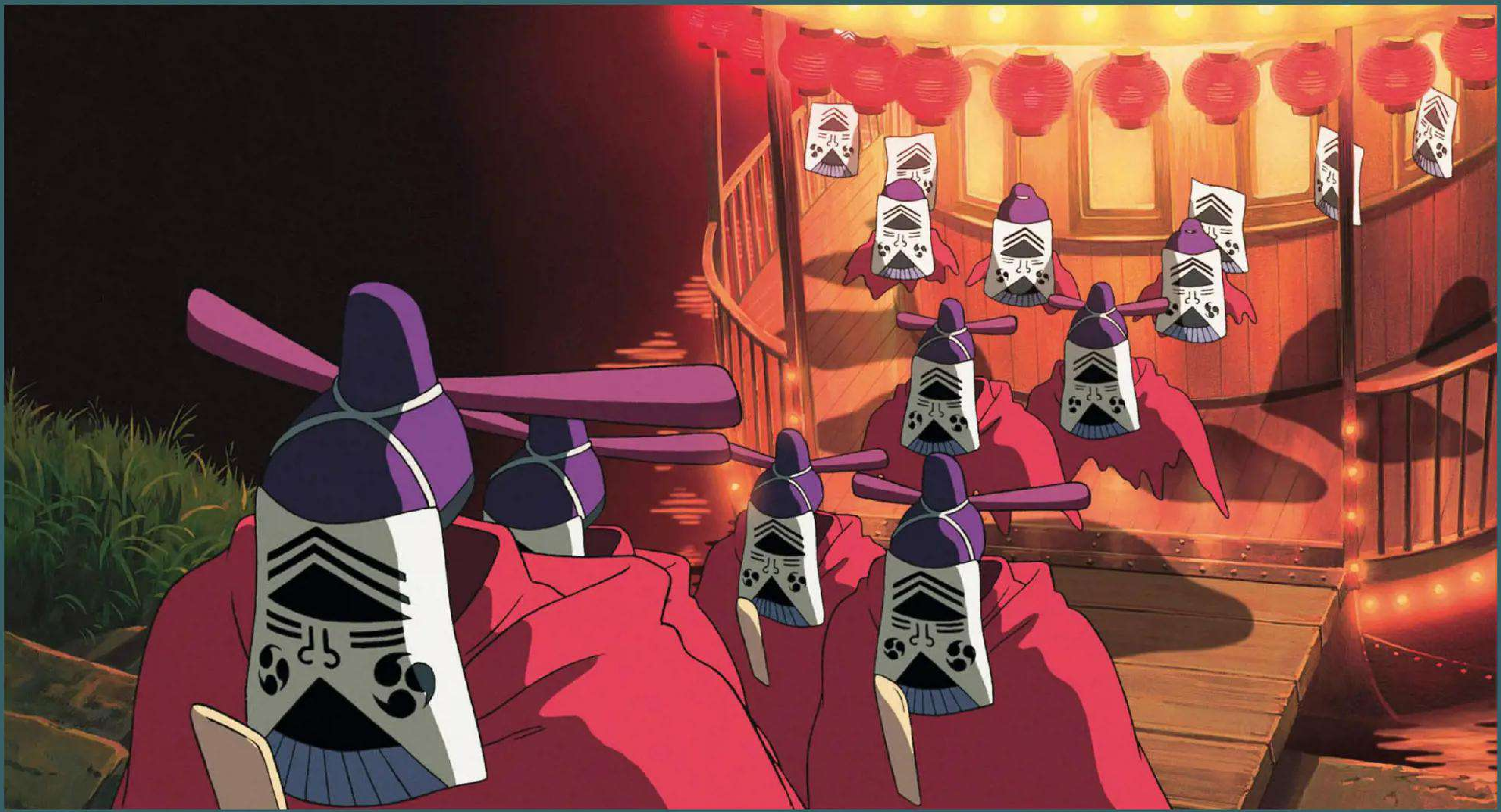
Ghibli didn't just introduce generations of Western audiences to Japanese folklore; it introduced us to the specific folklore of respect, reverence and friendliness towards the natural world that is so vital to the traditional Japanese worldview and is so badly needed in today's hyper-industrialised world. Japan, as a nation that attained modernity at breakneck speed and as one that had such a traditional reverence for nature, is uniquely placed to share this story with all of us. In Studio Ghibli's films, it does so with beauty, delicacy, and humour.

RIGHT The distinctive characters from these films have entered mainstream culture as seen with this No-face toy from *Spirited Away*

SPIRITED AWAY

GHIBLI'S MOST FOLKLORIC FILM

2001's *Spirited Away* doesn't have the explicitly eco-conscious themes of some other Studio Ghibli films running throughout it (although at its denouement this is an important part of the character Haku's backstory) but the soot-sprite-starring film introduces its audience to a wealth of Japanese kami, yōkai and other spirits, including river gods, shikigami paper ghosts, spider-people, the smelly Radish Spirit, kitsune girls and more. It also stars fictional folkloric creatures like the adorable otori-sama bird gods, the soot sprites, and the terrible, friendless No-Face, who all congregate in a spirit world bath house located in an abandoned amusement park that, like a gigantic tsukumogami, has come to life as an attraction for a very different kind of tourist…



In *Spirited Away*, an abandoned amusement park becomes a leisure destination for the uncanny

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

KITSUNE
THE FOX SPIRITS OF JAPAN

WHETHER REVERED GUARDIANS OR NEFARIOUS TRICKSTER SPIRITS, THE ALLURING FOX SPIRITS OF JAPAN HAVE ENTHRALLED PEOPLE FOR CENTURIES, AND STILL DO TODAY

WRITTEN BY **DEE DEE CHAINEY**

Kitsune are Japanese fox spirits, a type of Japanese yōkai with up to nine tails. Legends tell that they are trickster figures, like many fox-related creatures across different cultures, whose powers include the ability to become invisible and find lost things, and they are renowned for their great intelligence and long lives.

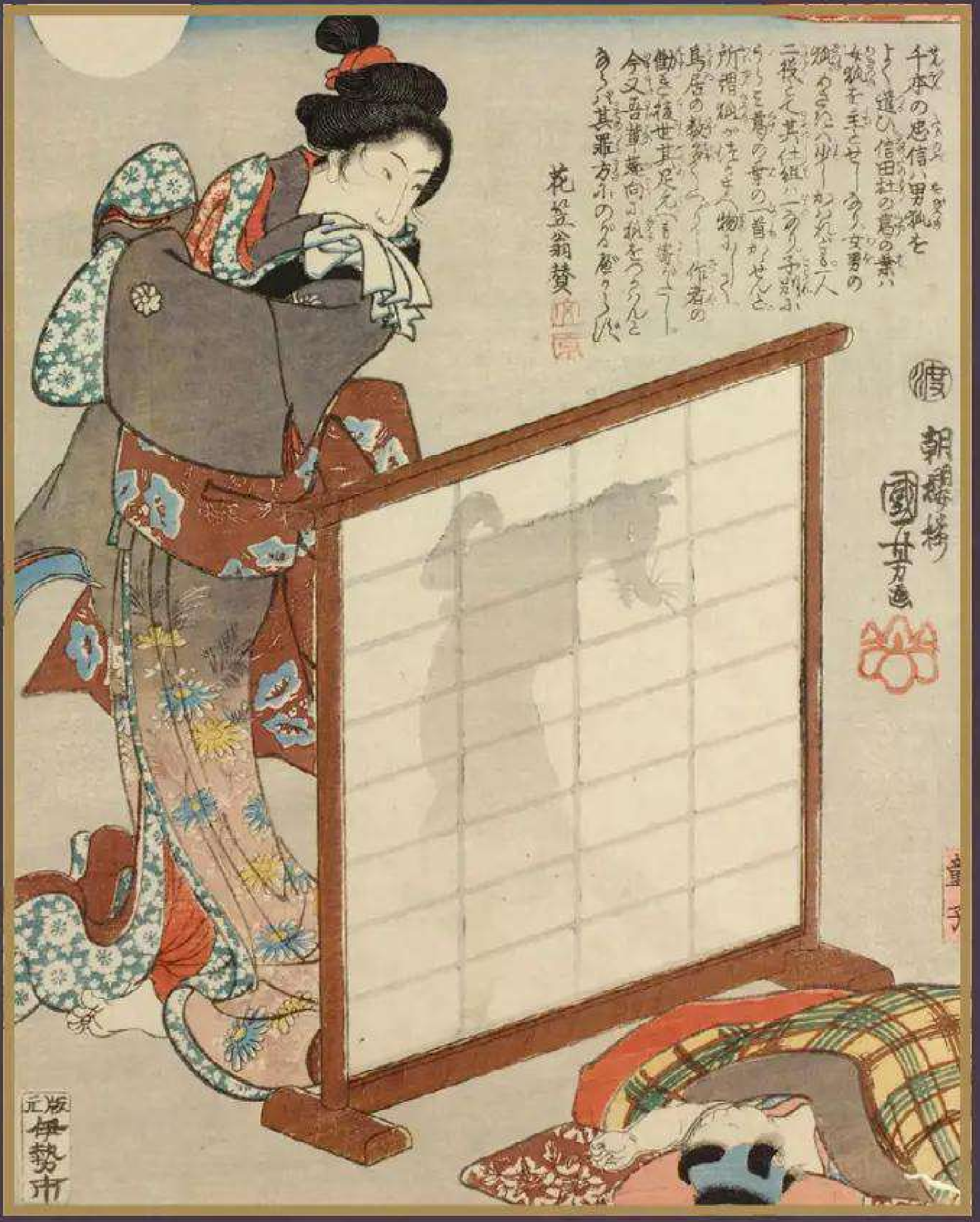
While there are many local variants, many split them into two kinds: the zenko, or 'good foxes', and the malicious version known as yako, 'field foxes'. The benevolent kind are the messengers of Inari, the kami – goddess or spirit – of rice, agriculture and fertility.

While both types are shape shifters, who are able to disguise themselves in human form – the evil tales suggest the preferred form is that of a winsome maiden, allowing them to snare unsuspecting men with their wiles. Some stories recount how they become the lovers of humans, or even their fox-wives, and bear their children. Those viewed as malevolent are blamed for a myriad of human experiences, including sickness, enchantment and bad luck. Kitsune are able to enter human bodies, possessing them, causing them to froth at the mouth, run naked through the streets, speak in tongues, and sometimes- eerily – a moving lump can be seen writhing underneath their skin. They are able to attach themselves to both individuals and specific families, which causes bad luck for all in the vicinity, and these families are ostracised by their neighbours. Such a spirit must be appeased by the family with food and offerings, especially their favourites: tofu, abura-age made from refried soyabeans, and azuki meshi, a dish of azuki beans and rice. If well-treated, they can bring prosperity to a family, and are renowned for repaying favours with the true gifts of protection, wisdom and good health. Tales tell their tangible gifts often decay to nothing in time, leaving the recipient disappointed and their efforts fruitless.

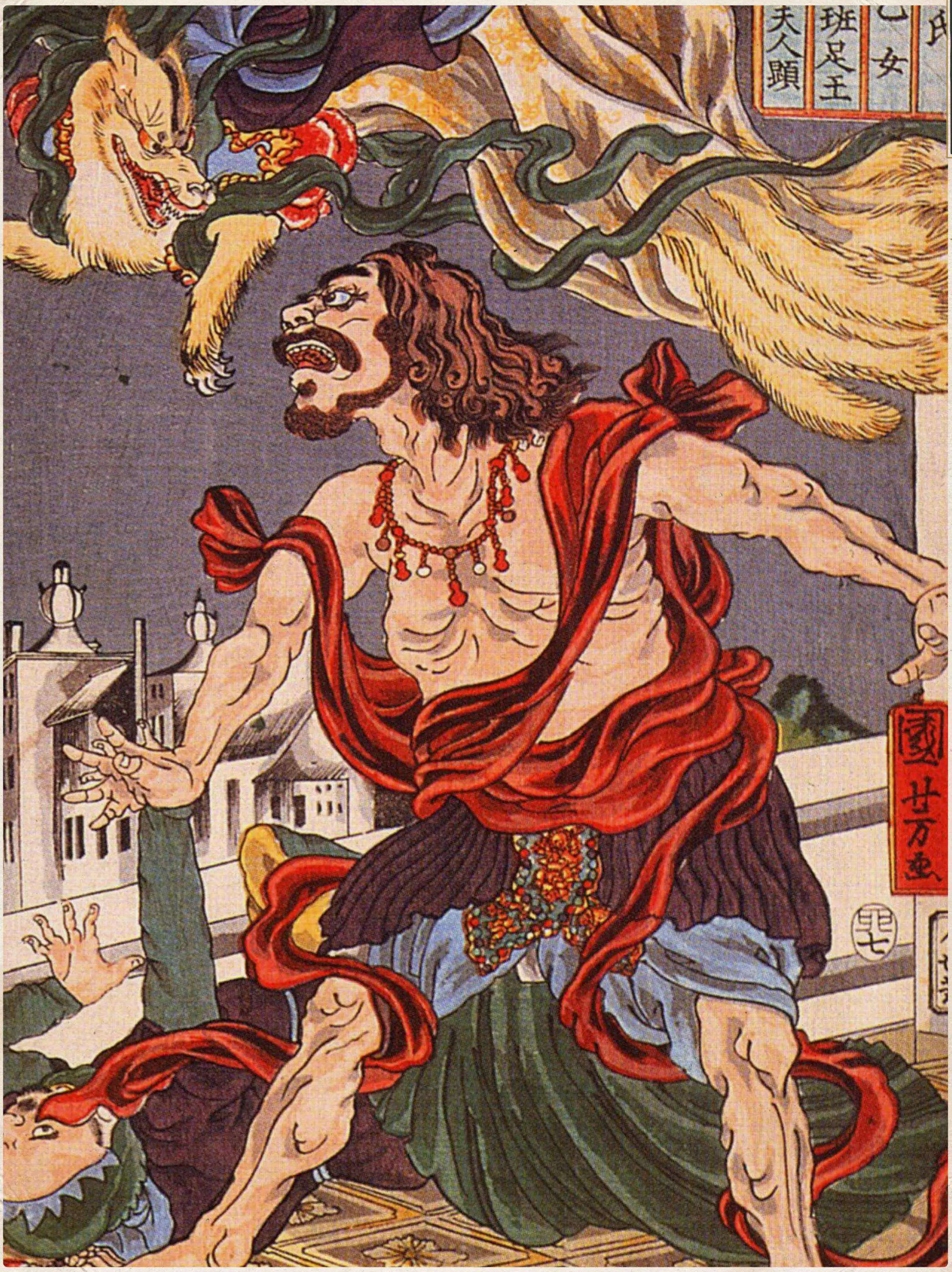
You can protect yourself from their charms by forming a diamond shape with your fingers and blowing through it – or be safe, and avoid the deserted places they frequent entirely. If you do fall prey to them, however, the only two methods to redeem you include a onmyoji, or spiritual healer, exorcising it with soft words, or of course, having the living daylights beaten out of you. Terrifyingly, legends do tell of women suspected to be kitsune being beaten and burned to death, and one can only wonder if the tales are true, like with many modern witchcraft cases around the world even now.

RIGHT Maybe originating from the húli jīng in Chinese mythology, fox spirits can grow up to nine tails as they age; becoming the Japanese kyūbi no kitsune ('nine-tailed fox')

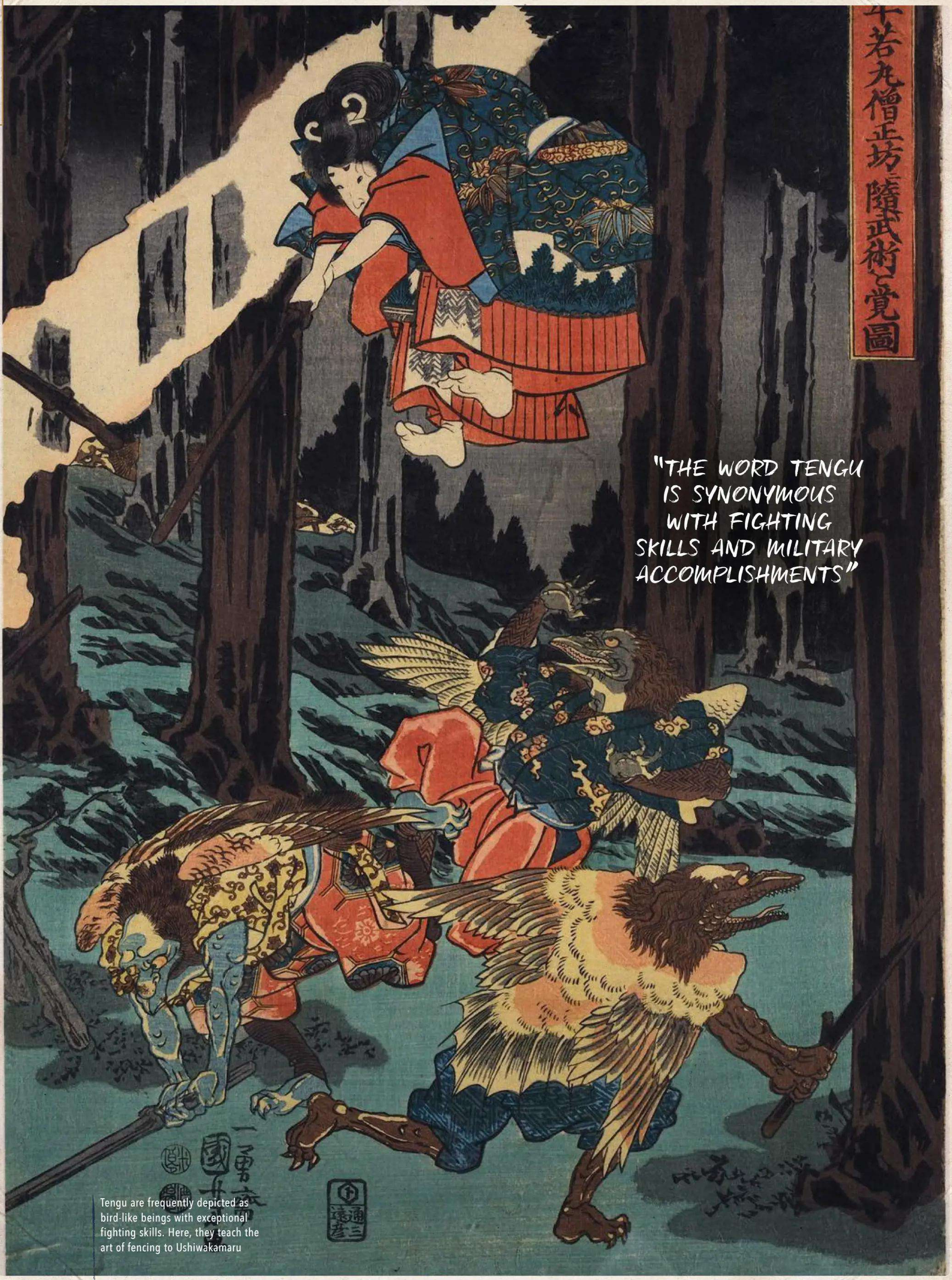
BELOW A kitsune's true identity can be uncovered by looking for their fox shadow, or fox tail. Kuzunoha the fox-woman, by Utagawa Kuniyoshi, 19th century



"KITSUNE ARE ABLE TO ENTER HUMAN BODIES, POSSESSING THEM"


女
班足王
夫人顕
國芳画

IMAGES Getty Images, Wiki Public Domain Utagawa Kuniyoshi


若丸僧正坊ニ隨武術ヲ覚圖
一勇斎國芳画

"THE WORD TENGU IS SYNONYMOUS WITH FIGHTING SKILLS AND MILITARY ACCOMPLISHMENTS"

Tengu are frequently depicted as bird-like beings with exceptional fighting skills. Here, they teach the art of fencing to Ushiwakamaru

IMAGES Getty Images, Creative Commons: Patstuart

THE MISCHIEVOUS TENGU

DEPICTED AS BOTH BIRD WARRIORS AND LONG-NOSED MEN, TENGU ARE REGARDED AS SKILLED FIGHTERS, YŌKAI AND EVEN GODS IN JAPANESE FOLKLORE

WRITTEN BY **KATE CHERRELL**

WHAT MAKES A TENGU?

Tengu are mischievous, powerful creatures in Japanese folklore, often appearing as monkey-like creatures with incredible swordsmanship. Much like the feared yamanba witches, they traditionally gather into small communities and live in the wooded areas of mountainous regions, where they are revered and feared by travellers and villagers alike. Some tales speak of tengu being the reincarnated souls of vengeful or arrogant humans, while others describe more supernatural origins, where they hatch from giant eggs.

The word tengu is synonymous with fighting skills and military accomplishments, with many tales recounting the tengu's ability to teach such skills to heroes in need. Subsequently, groups of tengu are headed by a singular leader, much like a military commander, who is frequently shown as wearing ceremonial robes and carrying a fan. His underlings are known as 'koppa tengu', or 'leaflet tengu', who run errands and send messages for their master.

Artistic depictions of tengu vary, from monkey-like creatures with swords, to smaller, bird-like beings with beaks, red faces or long noses. Those with bird-like characteristics are called 'karasu tengu' (crow tengu), while human-like tengu are 'konoha tengu' (tumbling leaf tengu). Despite these differences, all versions are intrinsically linked to Shinto and Buddhist beliefs, where tengu are regarded as yōkai, gods and even demons in some instances. While many depictions of tengu have mellowed in recent years, they were often regarded as warmongers and having the sole purpose of causing chaos and destruction in the human world.

SARUTAHIKO ŌKAMI

Most modern depictions of tengu feature a red face and long nose; characteristics originating with the konoha-tengu, Sarutahiko Ōkami. Not just a simple tengu, Sarutahiko is a god, symbol of strength and patron of martial arts. While ruling over all earthly kami (spirits venerated in Shinto beliefs), he was also worshipped as a sun god, and plays a prominent role in many folk tales alongside his wife, Ame-no-Uzume-no-Mikoto, goddess of the arts. He is depicted as an old man with a large beard, red face and long nose, while carrying a jewelled spear. While there are many other tengu described over the centuries, Sarutahiko's is the enduring image.

WARRIOR MINAMOTO YOSHITSUNE

Yoshitsune is a legendary 12th century Japanese warrior and regarded as the most famous samurai in Japanese history. His life and tales of military victory have been mythologised and romanticised in countless works, with one of his most famous tales chronicling time spent with the tengu as a youth. After Yoshitsune's father was killed, he was sent to Mount Kurama where he met the king and god of the tengu, Sōjōbō. As most tengu are nameless, Sōjōbō is one of few with a defined identity and purpose. At the temple, Sōjōbō trained him in martial arts, where Yoshitsune developed skills that transcended human abilities. It's thanks to the training of Sōjōbō that Yoshitsune was ultimately able to become a decorated military commander and legendary warrior.

Tengu masks are commonplace in traditional Japanese theatre and as decoration in homes and public spaces, where they are thought to bring good fortune

KAPPA:

THE DEMIGOD IN A SHELL

KAPPAS WON'T STAND FOR DISRESPECT, SO BE SURE TO TREAT THESE TURTLE-LIKE BEINGS LIKE THE GODS THEY ARE!

WRITTEN BY **KATE CHERRELL**

The kappa, or kawatarō are water-dwelling yōkai and demigods with a contradictory nature; killing, saving or even serving those who venture too close to the water's edge. Beloved and feared, kappa are obsessed with politeness and are renowned for becoming violent towards anyone who fails to acknowledge them as deities. Dwelling in ponds and rivers, kappa are reptilian, humanoid beings, often depicted with turtle-like shells, and webbed hands and feet. Most notably, the kappa has a dish-like depression on their head, which holds water. If this water is removed, or the dish damaged in some way, the kappa becomes incredibly weak and vulnerable. One way to defeat or ensnare a kappa is to exploit their politeness and trick them into bowing deeply. In doing so, the water from their head spills out and they become instantly weak. However, if you choose to refill the water dish, the kappa will be forever in your debt and become your servant. While kappa are child-sized yōkai, they are not to be underestimated, as they are far stronger than men and are particularly fond of sumo wrestling.

A WARNING

Kappas are intelligent beings and are regarded as rather benign and cheerful today, but were once known for their ruthless and violent nature. Tales of kappa were told to warn children of the dangers of open water, as the yōkai may snatch and drown them, or even drink their blood. Stranger still, kappas are said to prize the 'shirikodama', and try to extract it from their human victims. The shirikodama isn't an organ, but a fictional, magical ball found just within the anus! When not hunting shirikodama, kappa were known to drown animals, especially horses, spy on women and even kidnap children.

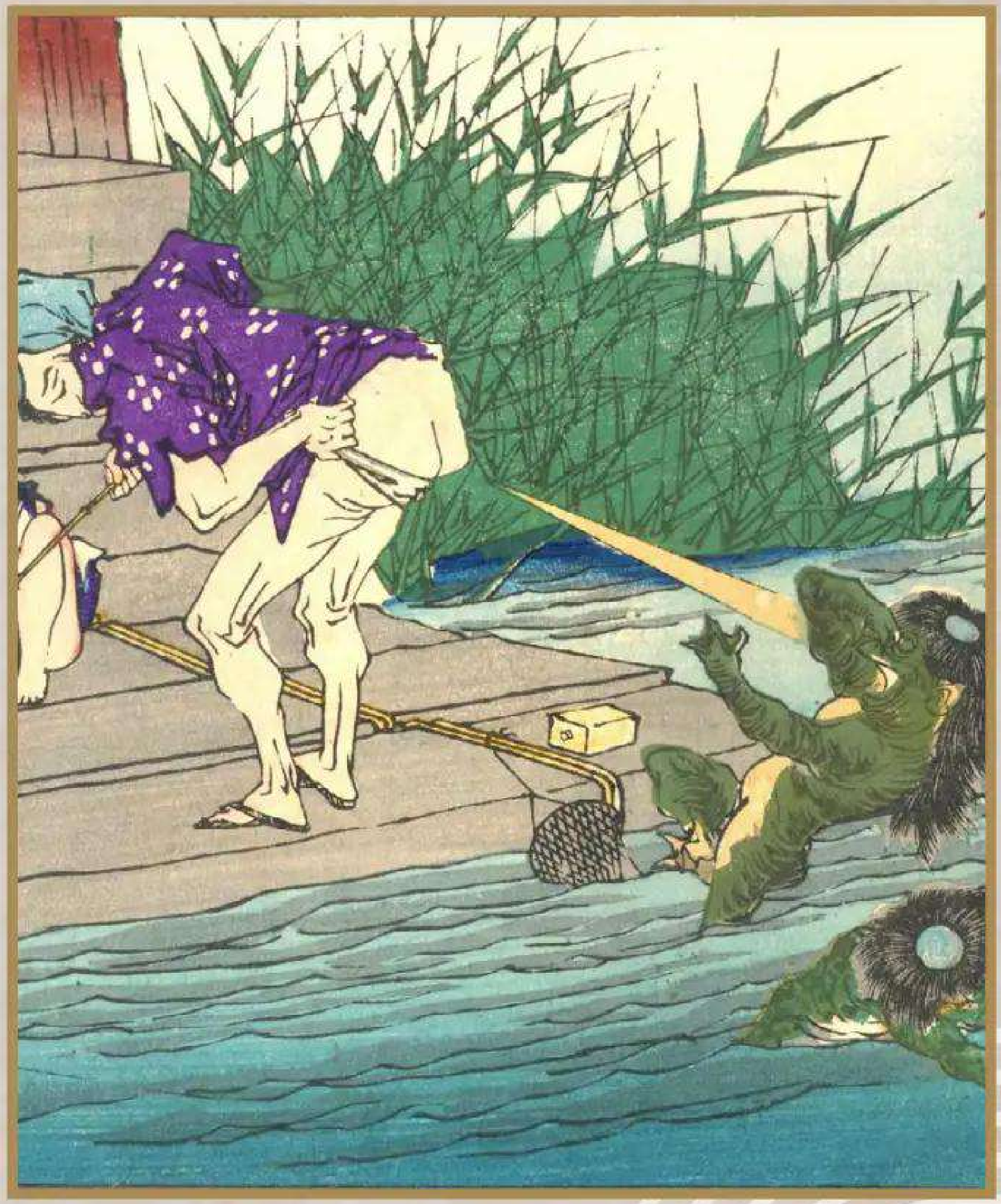
A KAPPA'S FAVOURITE SNACK

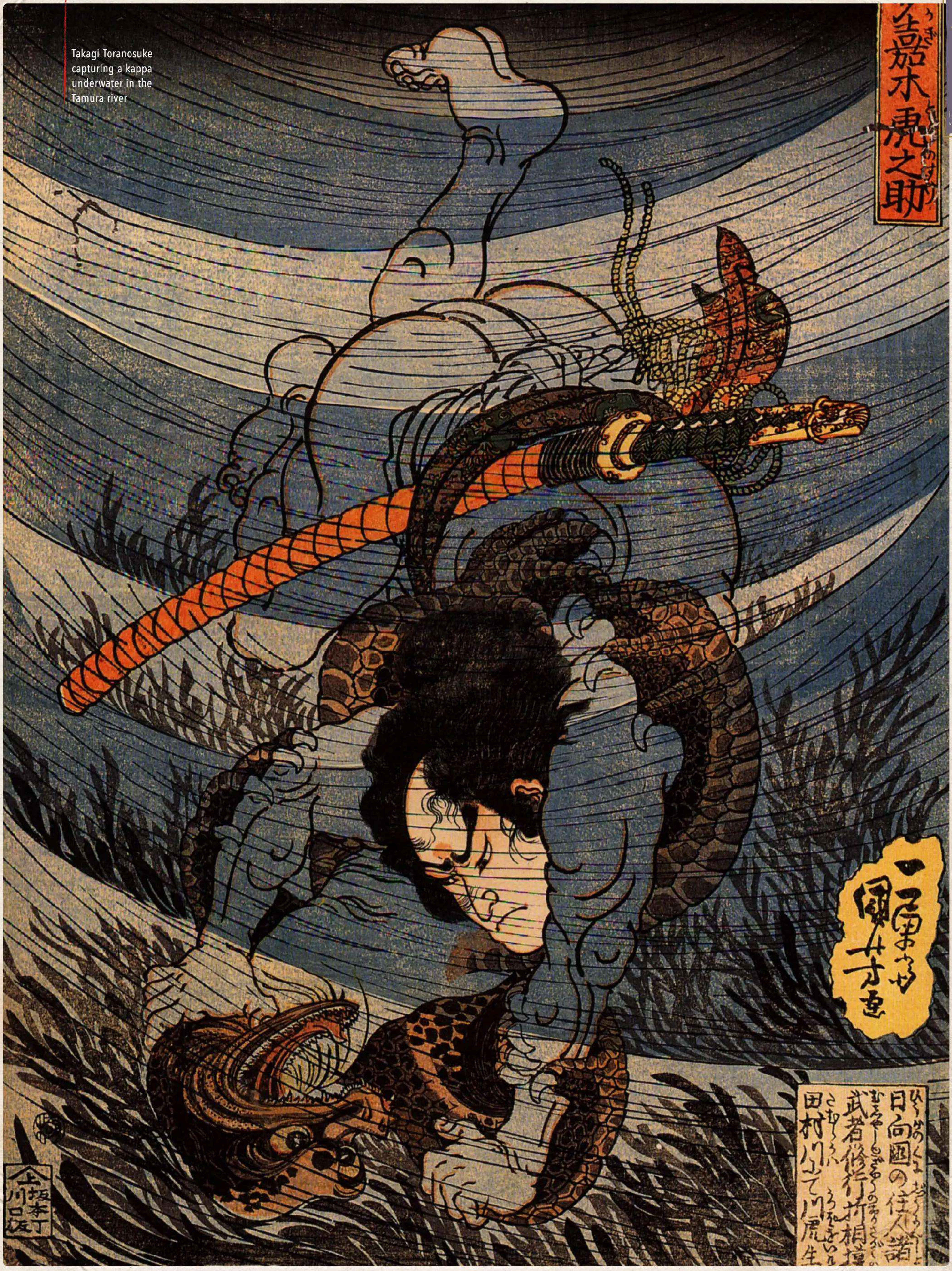
Although some traditional kappa may develop a taste for blood, it is universally accepted that the yōkai's favourite food is the humble cucumber. During festivals, cucumbers are brought as offerings and placed within shrines or close to rivers where they are left for the kappa to consume, ensuring they are appeased for the coming year. An older tradition in Tokyo was to write the names of family members on cucumbers before depositing them in rivers. In doing so, they hoped to ensure the safety of their family, sparing them from future kappa attacks.

BOWSER, THE KAPPA KING

Kappas are alive and well in popular culture, and few figures are as recognisable as Nintendo's villainous Bowser, also known as King Kooper. A familiar character in the Mario franchise, the kappa-like king is characterised by his spiked shell and fearsome roar, causing chaos across the Mushroom Kingdom. As Mario's arch-nemesis, he aspires to kidnap Princess Peach, and take her as his bride, aided by his minions, the turtle race of Koopas. So iconic is Bowser's appearance, he was once voted the greatest video game villain by the Guinness World Records.

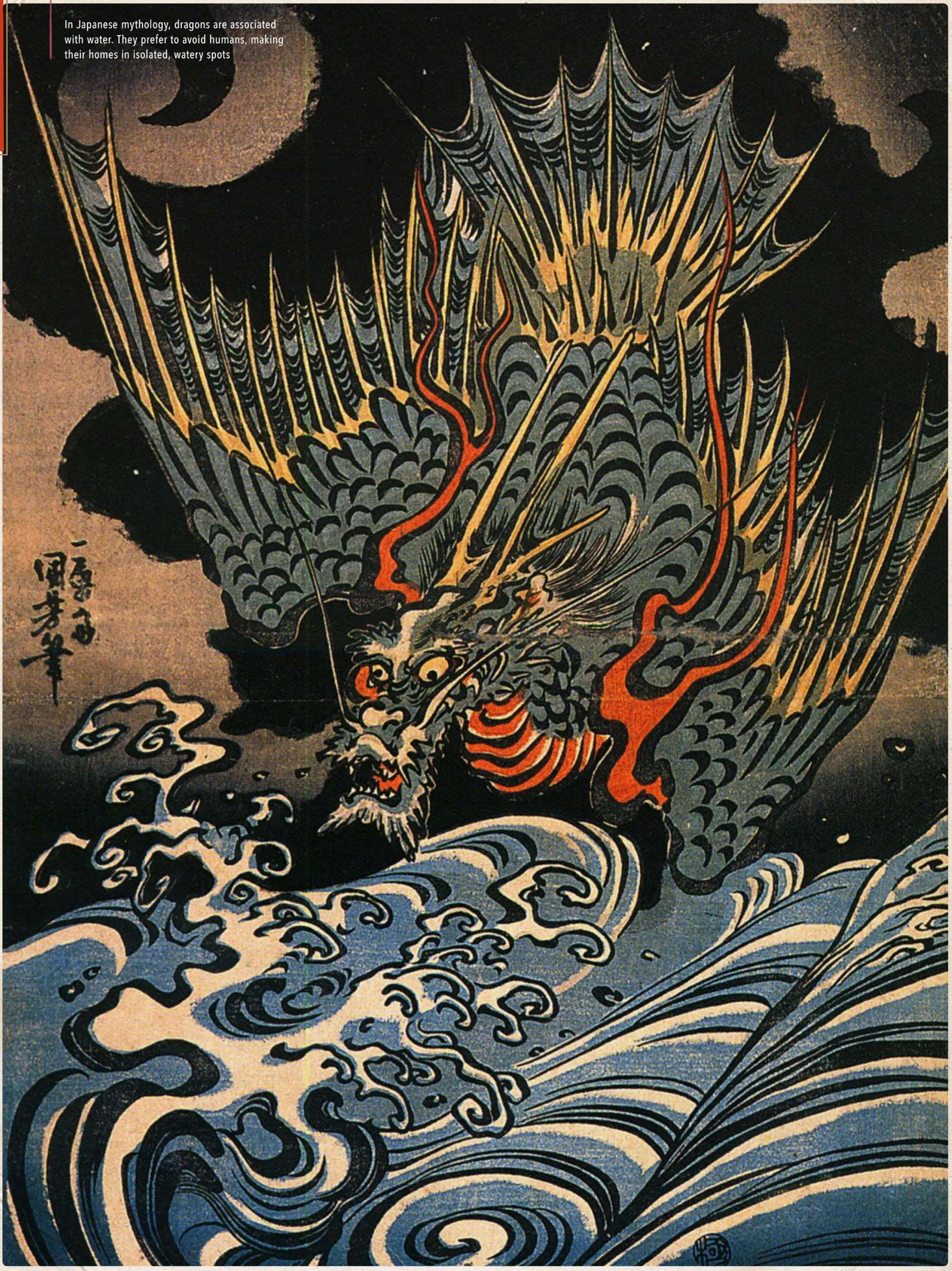
Few yōkai are as closely linked with bottoms as the kappa whose desire for the mystical 'shirikodama' is well documented. A fart is a powerful defence!




嘉木虎之助
一勇斎国芳画
日向國の住人諸
武者修行折柄撞
田村川にて川虎生

Takagi Toranosuke capturing a kappa underwater in the Tamura river

IMAGES Getty Images



In Japanese mythology, dragons are associated with water. They prefer to avoid humans, making their homes in isolated, watery spots

IMAGES Getty Images

JAPANESE DRAGONS

CENTRAL TO JAPANESE MYTHOLOGY, DRAGONS CAN BE FOUND IN COUNTLESS TALES FROM FOLKLORE, OFTEN COMBINING NATIVE LEGEND WITH CREATURES FROM ELSEWHERE

WRITTEN BY **CATHERINE CURZON**

Though dragons, or tatsu, have a rich association with Japanese myths, they are actually an imported beast, with Japanese mythology combining its own native legends with those of its geographical neighbours. The Chinese dragon has made a particular impact on the creatures that inhabit Japanese tales.

KAMI VS YŌKAI

In Japanese mythology, dragons can inhabit several categories. Some are kami, or gods, and are strongly associated with water. These enormous, wingless serpents stand on clawed feet and were worshipped as deities. They often live in impressive palaces deep beneath the sea and assume the appearance of humans, rarely appearing in their dragon form. The Japanese royal family itself is believed to be descended from these dragons.

People pray to kami dragons for rain or against flooding and other aquatic catastrophes. They are honoured by ritual dance, festivals and other celebrations.

The second most common category for Japanese dragons is that of yōkai, mythical beasts. While they share the appearance of the kami, they are not gods. They are also closely associated with water and, like the kami, avoid humans if possible. These dragons have a love of valuable and magical treasures.

URASHIMA TARŌ

A kami dragon plays an important role in the tale of fisherman Urashima Tarō, who saves a turtle from a gang of children and releases it into the ocean. The next day a large turtle approaches Tarō and tells him that the little turtle was actually the daughter of Ryūjin, the Dragon Emperor of the Sea, who would like to thank him.

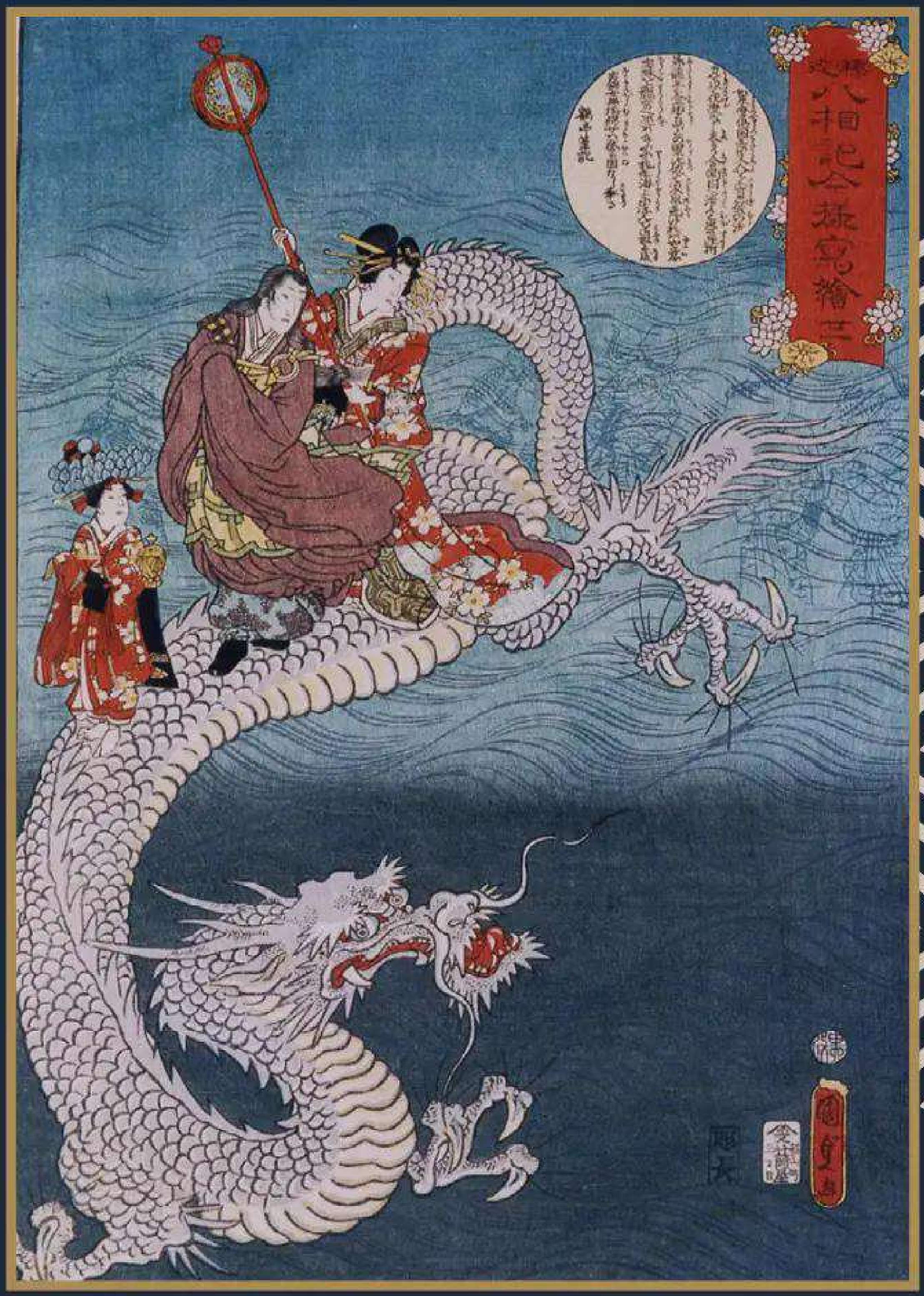
Thanks to the magic of the large turtle, Tarō goes beneath the sea to the magnificent Dragon Palace, to meet the emperor and his daughter, Princess Otohime, no longer in her animal form. Whilst Emperor Ryūjin appears as a human too, in his natural dragon form this wide-mouthed benevolent god is symbolic of Japan's seas and is credited with stirring up the hurricane which wiped out an invading Mongolian fleet. His palace is constructed of dazzling coral and, like the turtle who carried Tarō to the ocean floor, all sea creatures do the emperor's bidding.

Though Tarō and Otohime, the Dragon Princess, grow fond of one another, Tarō wants to go home to visit his ailing mother. When the two part, Otohime gives Tarō a box, which she promises will keep him safe so long as it remains unopened.

Tarō reaches home, but on arrival he learns that the days he spent beneath the waves have been centuries on earth. Distraught, he opens the box that the princess had given him and finds himself enveloped in smoke. As the smoke clears, Tarō is instantly transformed into an ancient figure with a crooked spine and long, white beard. From the ocean he hears the princess's voice call out to him one last time, sadly informing him that the box had contained just one thing: Tarō's old age.

> "THEY OFTEN LIVE IN IMPRESSIVE PALACES DEEP BENEATH THE SEA"

On occasion, some dragons have made their home near Buddhist monasteries and in this image, a dragon gives Buddha a ride



CAT YOKAI

FROM FORTUNE-BRINGING FELINES TO POLTERGEIST-SUMMONING PUSSIES, JAPAN'S FOLKLORE HAS A LOVE-HATE RELATIONSHIP WITH THE VENERABLE CAT

WRITTEN BY **KATE PUTTICK**

If you've had any kind of exposure to Japanese culture – or even just entered an Asian place of business at home or abroad – you'll probably have a passing familiarity with the sight of the luck-bringing Maneki Neko. This colourful figurine comes in the form of a benevolent-looking feline with a swinging arm beckoning you into the abode.

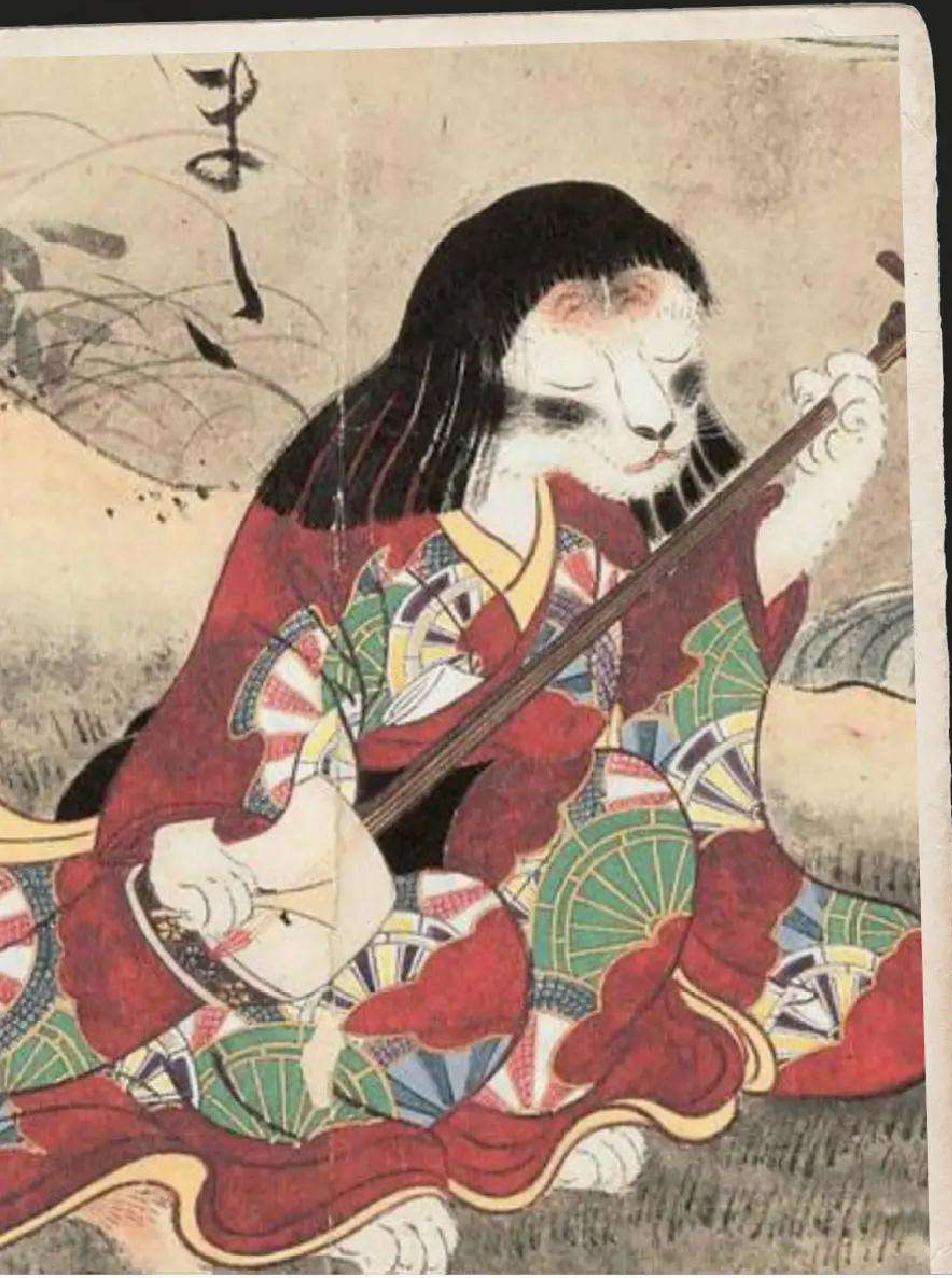
Modern cat culture in the country doesn't stop there, though. Especially for any tourists to the country. There are, of course, the ubiquitous Hello Kitty merchandise sellers, anime characters, adorable cat cafés and plenty of other kawaii, or cute, paraphernalia. But alongside all of these recent phenomena lies a more ancient and entrenched thread, something that is easily observed from the multiple cat temples in Japan.

When it comes to cat mythology, mystery abounds. How did this seemingly non-native creature even reach this island nation? One answer seems to have been that they disembarked alongside Buddhism monks many centuries ago, their mystique entwining with that of the new religion.

Cats make plentiful cameos in the canon of Japanese monster – or yokai – mythology, but let's consider the A-listers.

THE GOOD

In keeping with the general ethos around Japan's mythical beings, the cat yokai are a mixed bag in terms of good and evil, earthly or otherworldly. The cat that launched a thousand undulating souvenirs, the Maneki Neko, is considered to be good. Its origin story takes place in the Setagaya area of Tokyo in the 17th century. Famous general, Li Naotaka, was passing through the area when he noticed the entirely normal sight of a cat beckoning him into a temple. As soon as he stepped over the threshold, a bolt of lightning struck where he would have otherwise trod. The military man and his family lent his allegiance to the temple from that point on. You can still visit the site, known as Gotokuji Temple, today.



The deceptively malevolent Nekomata yokai

THE PRAGMATICALLY EVIL

The foil to the Maneki Neko's famous magnanimity is the Bakeneko subcategory of cat yokai. These fiends didn't always start out on a path to villainy. Usually considered to have been common or garden house cats during their early lives, once they lived past a certain age they were said to take on new powers, often through a desire to impersonate their owners.

One legend speaks of a man who only discovered that his wife had been recently devoured and impersonated by the family cat when he observed her gorging on birds and mice secretly in a back room.

THE TRULY HEINOUS

This Bakeneko tale might seem fairly unpleasant but consensus is that the Bakeneko's antics are simply those of an animal doing what it has to, perhaps at a time of scarcity. The same cannot be said of their peers, the fork-tailed Nekomata or Kasha. Entering into a state of monsterhood once they reached old age, like the Bakeneko, the Nekomata instead retains no allegiance to their owners – unleashing sheer hell on neighbouring humans in myriad creative ways. That may include running away to the mountains to terrorise and torture passing travellers, or setting catastrophic curses and poltergeist activity onto homes.

> "ONCE PAST A CERTAIN AGE THEY WERE SAID TO TAKE ON NEW POWERS"

Followers leave figures as devotional items at Gōtokuji Temple, the birthplace of Maneki Neko

IMAGES Getty Images

The tanuki is a cute mix between a fox and a dog but their appearance has led to them mistakenly being described as a racoon

THE RACOON DOG

JAPAN'S NATIVE CREATURE HAS BEEN AN ICON OF THE COUNTRY'S CULTURE FOR CENTURIES AND STATUES OF IT ARE SEEN ON STREETS EVEN TODAY

WRITTEN BY **AIDEN DALBY**

While the word yōkai is often used to describe ghosts or supernatural creatures, the tanuki is a type of yokai called a henge. In folklore, these creatures can shapeshift, but unlike foxes, which are typically portrayed as mean-spirited and villainous, the tanuki is instead playful and pranksterish. Stories of tanuki date all the way back to the Nihon Shoki, Japan's oldest collection of folklore and continue to appear through literature across the periods. Tanuki are unique to Japan and have been a mainstay in Japanese folklore for centuries. They still appear in popular culture today: they not only appear in video games and anime but you can see statues of them on streetcorners all across Japan.

While they may look like a raccoon due to their colours and dark fur around the eyes, they are actually related to foxes and dogs. They live in the mountains and fields throughout most of Japan, but have also been spotted in cities.

THE LUCKY SYMBOLS OF A TANUKI

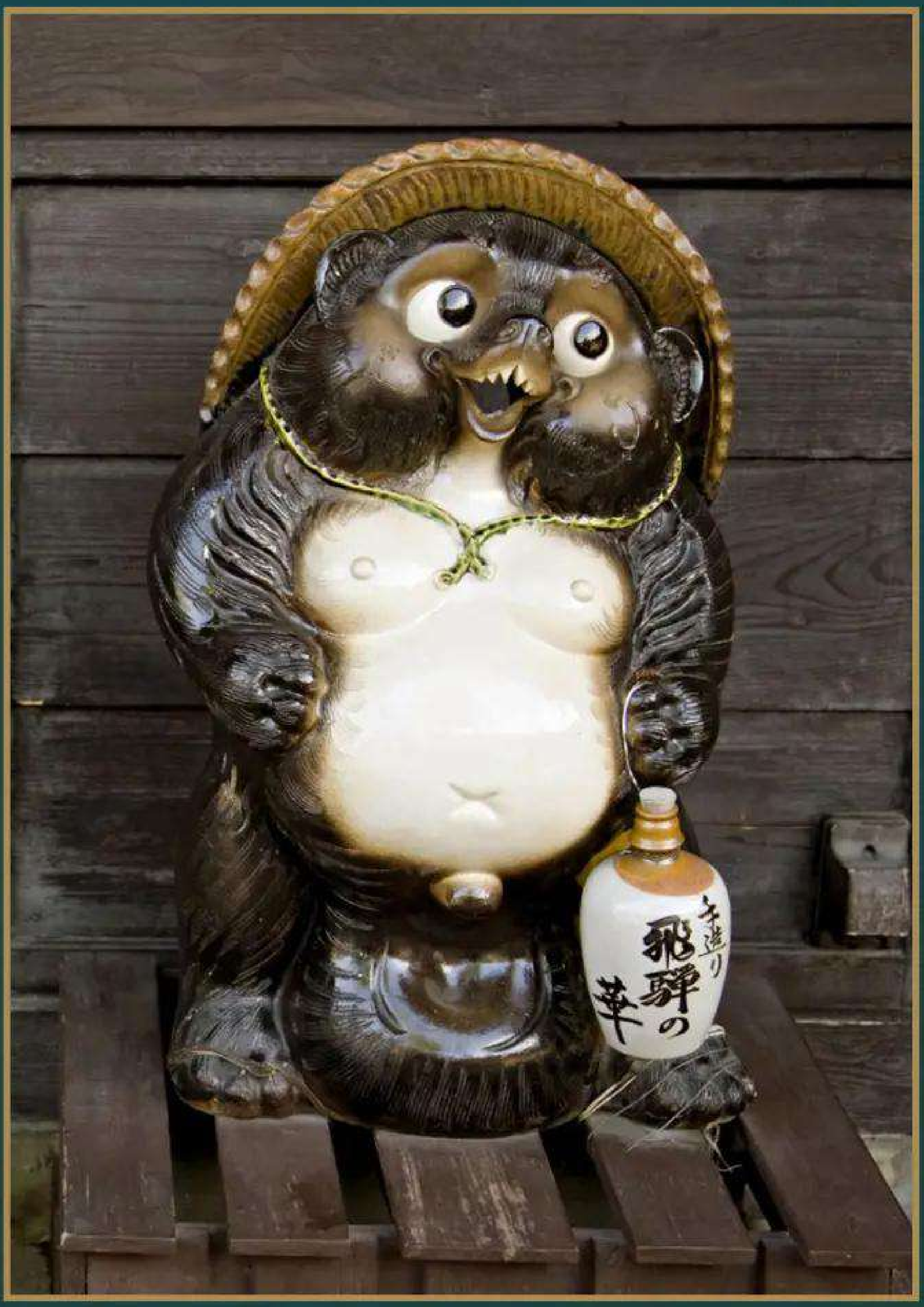
Today, statues of the animals can be found on the streets of Japan, not only outside stores and bars but at shrines. These depictions often have the same eight physical attributes and are linked to characteristics that people wish to imbue themselves with in order to live a full and happy life. These are: a smile to show friendliness, a sake bottle in one hand to show they will not go hungry or thirsty, a promissory note to show it has no debts, a hat to protect itself from bad weather and look after itself, big eyes to help it see things ahead, a tail to provide steadiness and a big white belly for purity. The eighth is perhaps the most infamous and that is the large testicles. This isn't in folklore, and as to why the statues have this feature is hazy, but it could be to do with the Japanese word 'kintama', which means golden balls, but is also used as slang for testicles. Some store owners made a connection between big gold balls and the prosperity of business and then the idea stuck.

THE TANUKI'S POWERS

The most common ability of the tanuki in folklore is transformation. Some stories feature the animals transforming into humans, blending into society and participating in drinking, gambling and getting into mischief. Other tales tell of the tanuki turning into everyday objects and pranking unsuspecting humans. One popular story from the 19th century titled *Bunbuku Chagama*, or *Bunbuku tea-kettle*, tells of a tanuki that disguises itself as a tea kettle. Bought by a priest, the kettle is put on a fire before transforming back into a tanuki and as a result, it is thrown out by the priest. It is found by a travelling salesman who upon discovering the transforming abilities, takes in the tanuki and sets up a side-show and people come to see the 'dancing tea kettle'. The salesman shares his food with the tanuki and the two become wealthy.

> "IN FOLKLORE, THESE CREATURES CAN SHAPESHIFT, BUT UNLIKE FOXES, THE TANUKI IS PLAYFUL AND PRANKSTERISH"

Statues of tanuki can be found all across Japan, and they will feature the same eight characteristics, depicting positive attributes



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TSUKUMOGAMI
WHEN HOUSEHOLD TOOLS AWAKEN

GHOSTS AND DEMONS DON'T ALWAYS LOOK SCARY AT FIRST GLANCE – BUT JAPANESE FOLK BELIEF SAYS BE WARY OF WHAT'S IN YOUR CUPBOARDS

WRITTEN BY **APRIL MADDEN**

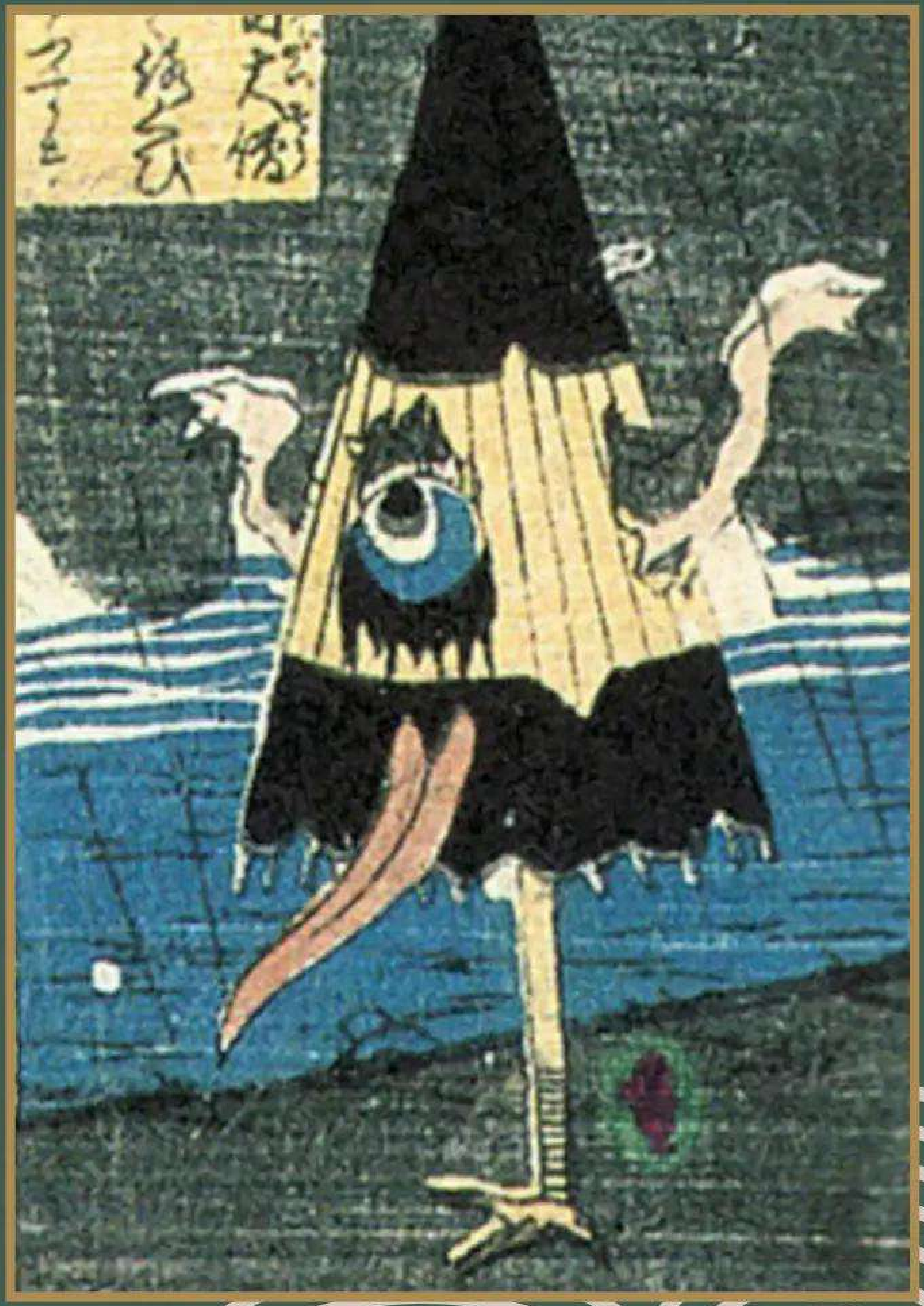
In Japanese folk belief, everyday objects can take on a life of their own. On their 100th birthday (or, some say, after up to 99 years of neglect and under-appreciation), household objects can awaken as kami or yōkai in their own right. Shoes, kettles, lanterns, musical instruments and more can all become literally self-possessed – but for some, their useful life is very definitely at an end.

Tea caddies were a popular high-end collectible among the samurai – one legend even states that there were three named tea caddies that together were worth more than all of the islands of Japan. One of these was alive and named Tsukumogami; it became a bargaining chip between two powerful warlords and is said to have given its name to all awakened objects and tools. Traditionally, a household object can become tsukumogami on its 100th birthday. Having been in close contact with humans for decades they may decide to continue, perhaps even being helpful or watchful, becoming kami, or small gods. But some objects are mischievous and even downright wicked. These might not even wait until their 100th birthday to awaken, especially if they've been abandoned or ignored, and feel slighted. These tsukumogami instead become yōkai, or demons, and set about causing trouble wherever they can.

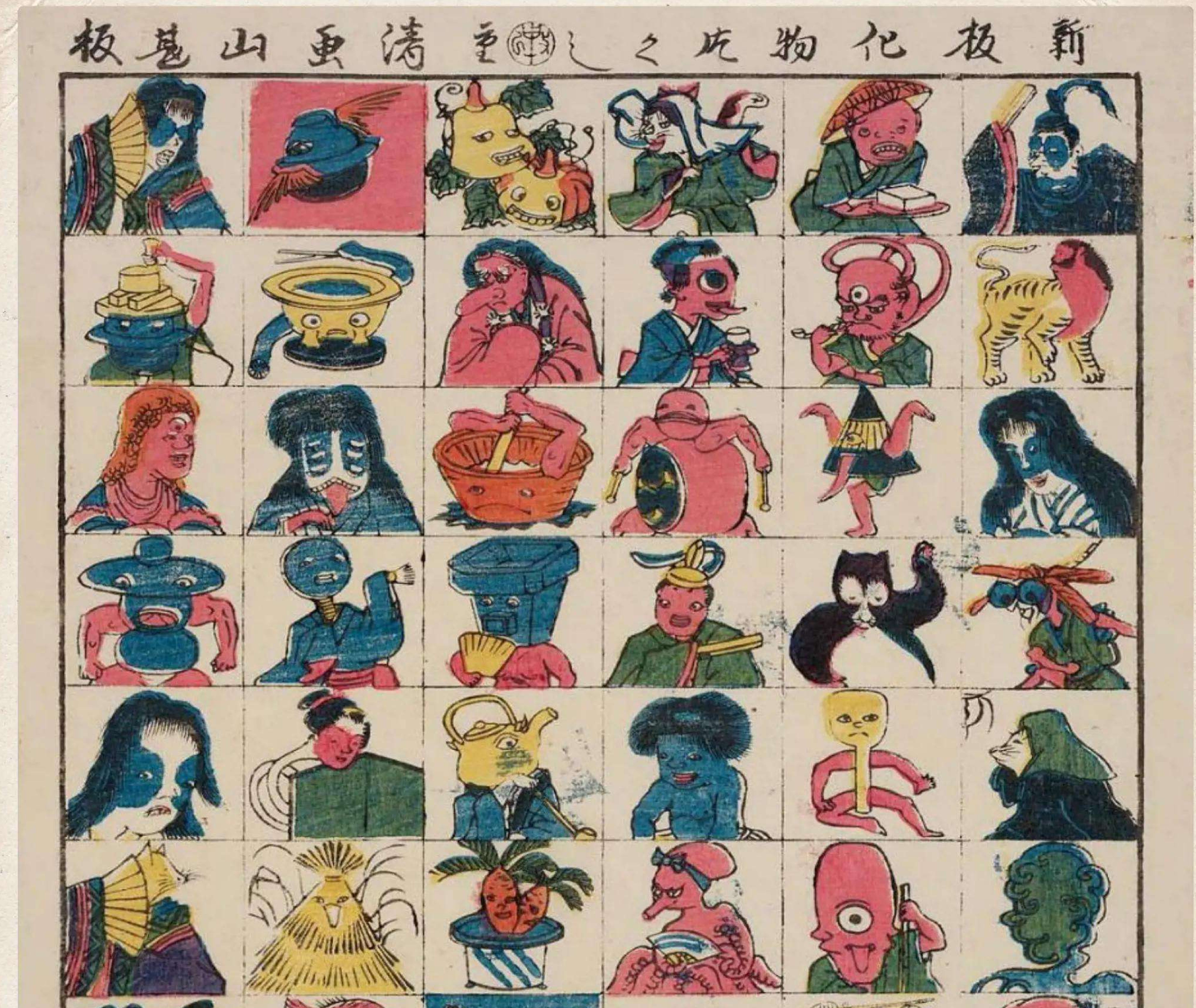
Kasa-obake are haunted umbrellas with one eye and one foot. They hop around and poke out their long tongues, like naughty children, and no longer keep people safe from the weather. In Ehime Prefecture there's a story of one who likes to scare people on rainy nights so that they stand frozen with terror, getting soaked. Another, in Tottori Prefecture, lies in wait on windy days, grabbing up unfortunate passers-by and billowing them into the sky. Chōchin'obake, or lantern spooks, are said to frighten worshippers at shrines, and lead souls astray. Boroboroton are futons that have come to life. No longer providing warmth and comfort, instead they jump up in the air to throw unwitting sleepers out of bed, before attempting to entwine them in blankets and strangle them. The phenomenon isn't limited to ancient, traditionally Japanese items either. Zorigami are haunted clocks, and the ordinary kind only arrived in the islands in the 16th century with the advent of the first European visitors to Japanese shores.

Modern objects, then, are just as capable of becoming tsukumogami, which raises interesting questions about the life – and afterlife – of the Tamagotchi. These Japanese toys, invented in the late 1990s, were little egg-shaped devices with an LCD display in which 'lived' a small digital pet. Programmed to mimic hunger, growth, and loneliness, early Tamagotchi caused controversy because they could 'die' from neglect in as little as half a day. Children were reported to mourn their deceased Tamagotchi and even bury them in graveyards, and an apocryphal story from 1997 alleges that one teenager killed herself when her Tamagotchi, which her parents had taken away from her as a disciplinary measure, 'died'. Could these little toys, which enact a parody of life, one day make their digital dream a reality?

Kasa-obake are mischievous umbrella yōkai – be wary of them in bad weather!

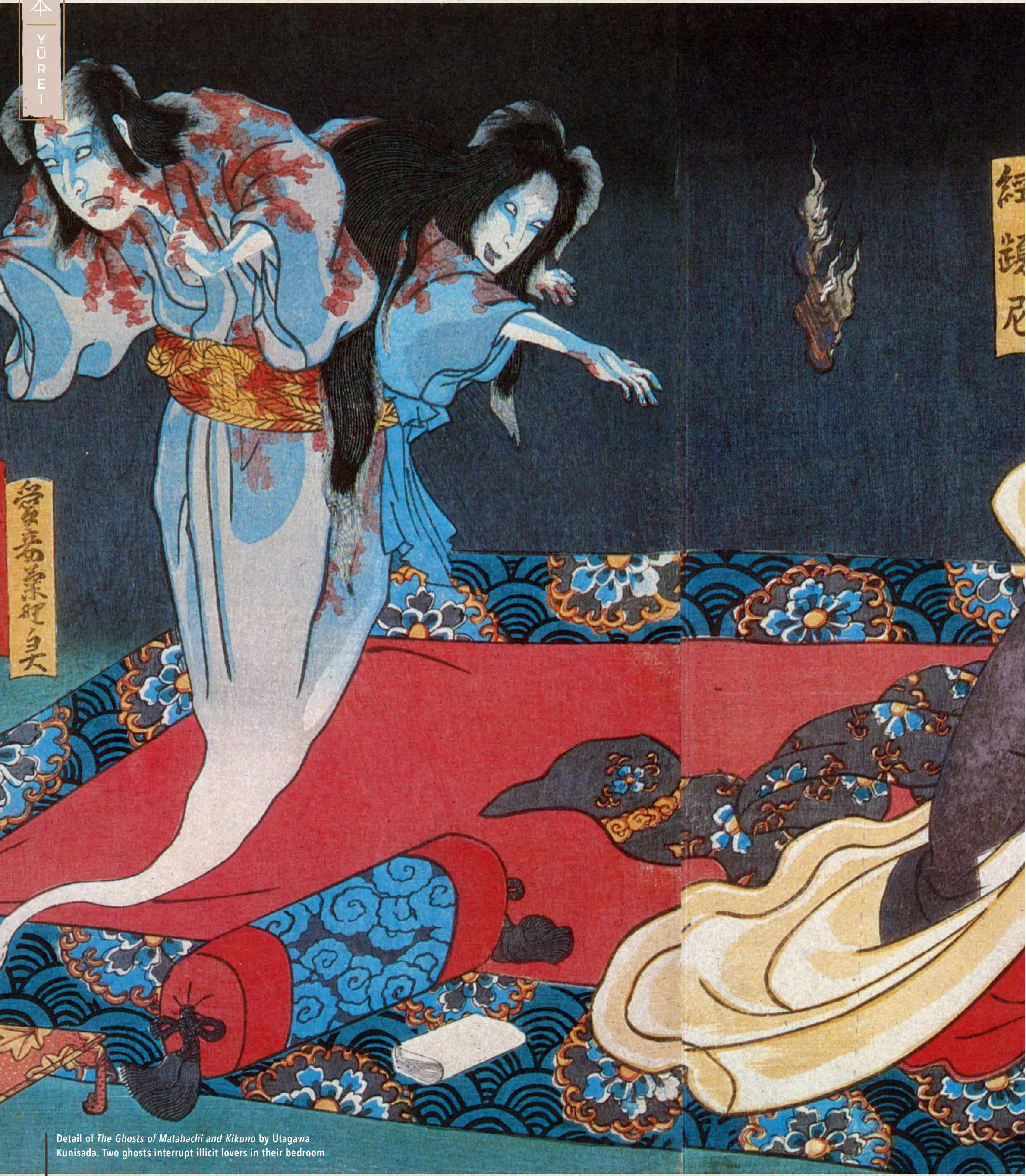


> "SHOES, KETTLES, LANTERNS, MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS AND MORE CAN ALL BECOME LITERALLY SELF-POSSESSED"

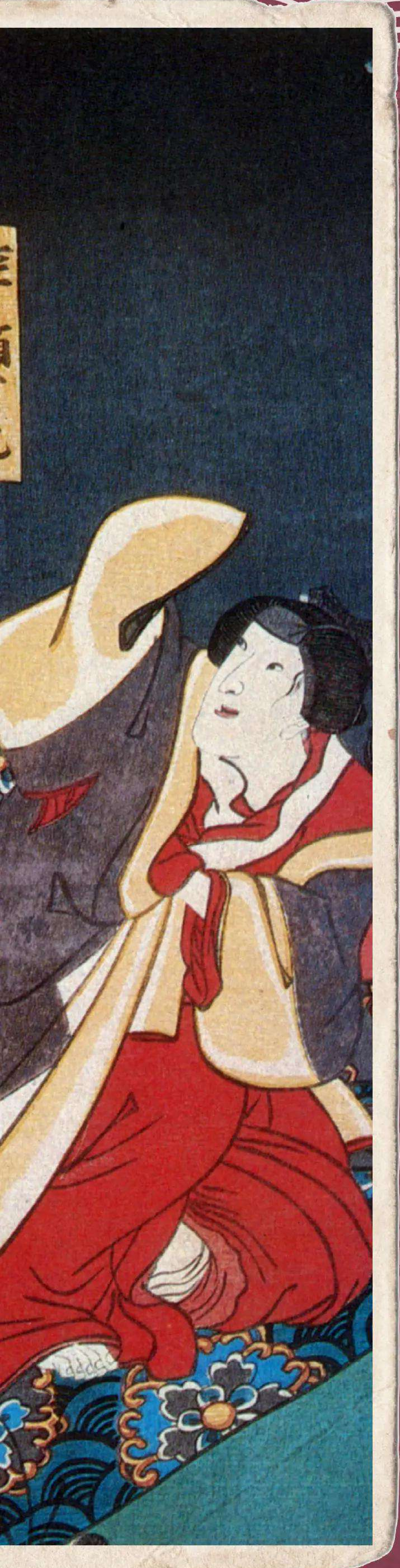

新板化物尽くし
画 清重 山崟板

A page from a Japanese bestiary showing various tsukumogami, or household object spirits

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy



Detail of *The Ghosts of Matahachi and Kikuno* by Utagawa Kunisada. Two ghosts interrupt illicit lovers in their bedroom



YŪREI SPIRITS OF THE DEAD

THE YŪREI ARE NOT JUST GHOSTS DRIFTING THROUGH THE WORLD. THEY'RE GHOSTS WHO NEED OUR HELP — AND YOU'D BETTER GIVE YOURS, IF YOU CAN

WRITTEN BY **ICY SEDGWICK**

When a person dies in Japan, their loved ones say prayers so their soul can go to the afterlife. The living honour these individuals, especially ancestors, and the Obon festival in August provides a focal point for these rites.

But it doesn't always work that way. If no one performs the rites, or a person dies suddenly or in a violent way, the soul gets stuck between this world and the next. At best, these souls become yūrei, or 'faint spirits'. At worst, a person who dies in a catastrophe, or as a result of murder or war, might become the wrath-filled onryō.

THE YŪREI'S PURPOSE

As souls of the dead, yūrei are often depicted with long hair, wearing the white burial kimono they were buried in–an image familiar from Japanese horror cinema. Their translucent feet and legs make it look like they're floating. Sometimes flickering lights surround them.

They haunt people and places, loitering where they died or were buried. Those that haunt people haunt either their family or their killer. They're driven by an all-consuming need, and only helping them satisfy that need can get rid of them. They might need to pass on messages, identify their killer, or reveal their body's location so the living can follow the proper burial rites.

Surprisingly, yūrei were originally benevolent ghosts, only becoming terrifying in the early modern period. They transformed from dead souls into spirits that wouldn't pass on until their will was done. The notion that the living should appease the dead only dates to the late 19th century when Greco-British writer Lafcadio Hearn collected Japanese ghost stories for Western audiences.

YŪREI VS YŌKAI

There is a debate as to whether yūrei are a sub-category of yōkai, also known as mononoke, which are supernatural creatures in folklore all over Japan. There are many types of mononoke, from benevolent spirits like the Ōkami (a protective wolf god) to terrifying spirits like the Oni (a demonic ogre).

Zashiki warashi are sometimes called the ghosts of children, but they're house spirits

> "SURPRISINGLY, YŪREI WERE ORIGINALLY BENEVOLENT GHOSTS"

"ONRYÓ CAN BE APPEASED WITH THE HONOURS THEY DESERVE"

that take a vaguely child-like form. They make mischief but people love them because they bring good fortune to the houses in which they live. They sometimes play with children in the house and they'll provide company to the elderly. It's important not to drive them away, as they'll take any prosperity with them.

The obake, or bakemono, is a shapeshifting subclass of the yōkai and their name comes from 'bakeru', the verb meaning 'to change' or 'to transform'. Bakemono include shapeshifting animal spirits, like the kitsune (fox), although some use the word to refer to ghosts that change their form.

KUCHISAKE-ONNA

MEET THE SLIT-MOUTHED WOMAN

Kuchisake-onna is a terrifying onryō, with her mouth slit to each ear. Known as 'The Slit-Mouthed Woman', different legends suggest a failed medical procedure or a mutilating husband for her origins. She covers her face when approaching victims, before asking if she's beautiful. If they say no, she kills them with scissors. If she says yes, she reveals her mouth, and asks again. If they say no, she kills them, and if they say yes, she cuts their mouth to resemble hers. Tell her she's average-looking, or placate her with candy.

The eponymous yūrei from Miki Muzuno's 2007 film, *Carved: The Slit-Mouthed Woman*

Some scholars argue that yūrei are distinct figures linked to people or places; they can be identified as the spirits of specific individuals. Yōkai are associated with the natural world or even inanimate objects. Yet other scholars suggest anything taking human form is a yūrei, and anything in non-human form is a yōkai. Others see the yūrei as a subcategory of the yōkai since humans are, after all, a type of animal.

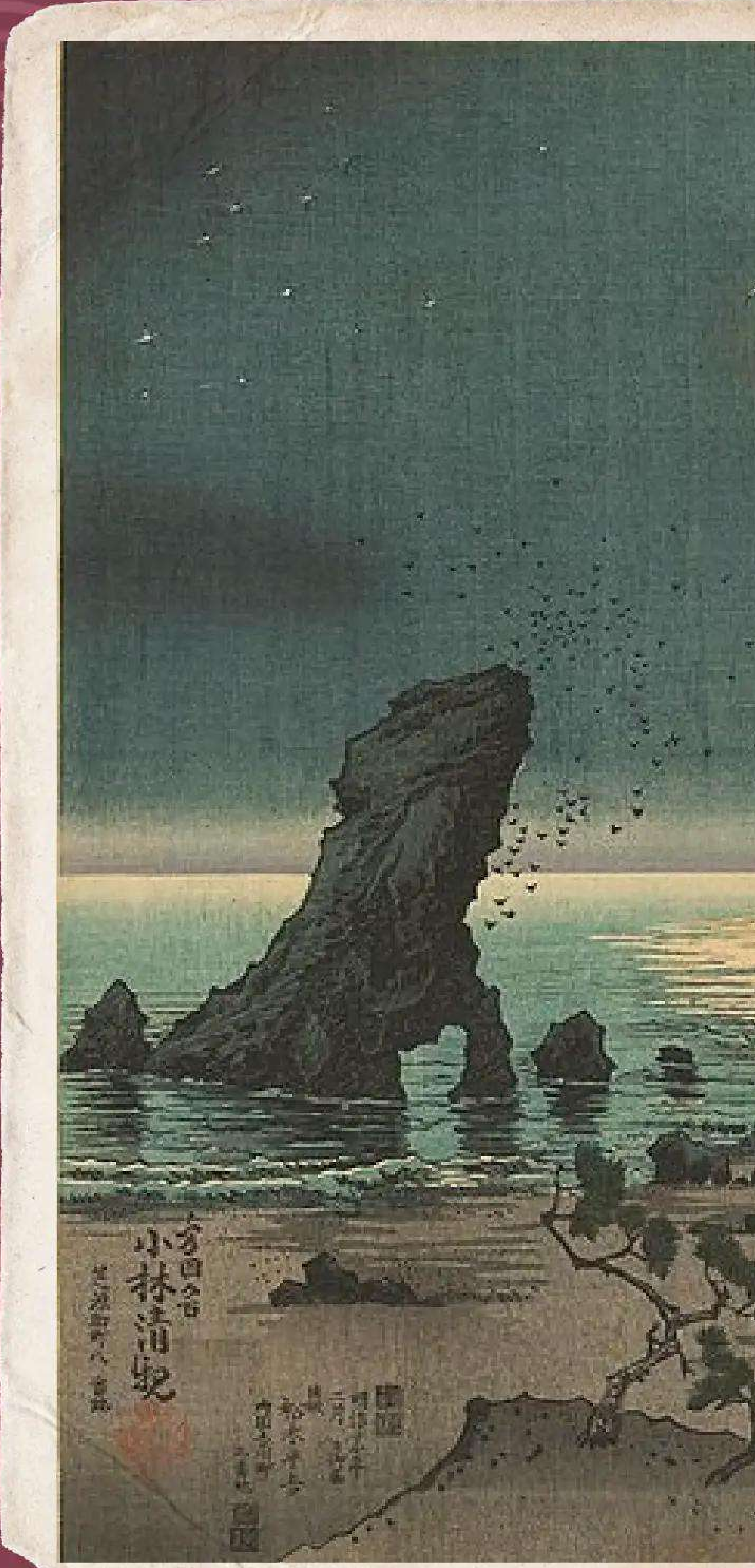
ONRYŌ, GORYŌ AND TATARIGAMI

The onryō is the most terrifying type of yūrei. Takashi Shimizu's *Grudge* movies immortalised them on screen: they are the personification of rage, with their wrath so powerful it infects a place and anyone who enters it. They're driven solely by revenge, although they will torment their intended victim (and their families) for years before killing them.

Traditional Japanese Noh theatre represents the onryō using hannya masks, with distinctive sharp horns, grinning mouths complete with fangs, and metallic, protruding eyes. Yet by changing the angle of the head, the actor can make the mask can appear to show different emotions; simply tilting the mask down can make the face look sad, compared to its angry expression seen face-on.

The most famous onryō is Oiwa, who appears in the 1825 play *Yotsuya Kaidan* ('The Ghost Story of Yotsuya'). This beautiful young woman was tortured by her unfaithful samurai husband, Iemon. Eventually, she cursed him for leaving her for another woman before killing herself. Oiwa became an onryō and in her afterlife tormented Iemon, his new wife, and all who came into contact with them. Some believe the real Oiwa died in 1636 and actors sometimes visit her grave before putting on the play to ask for her blessing to tell her story.

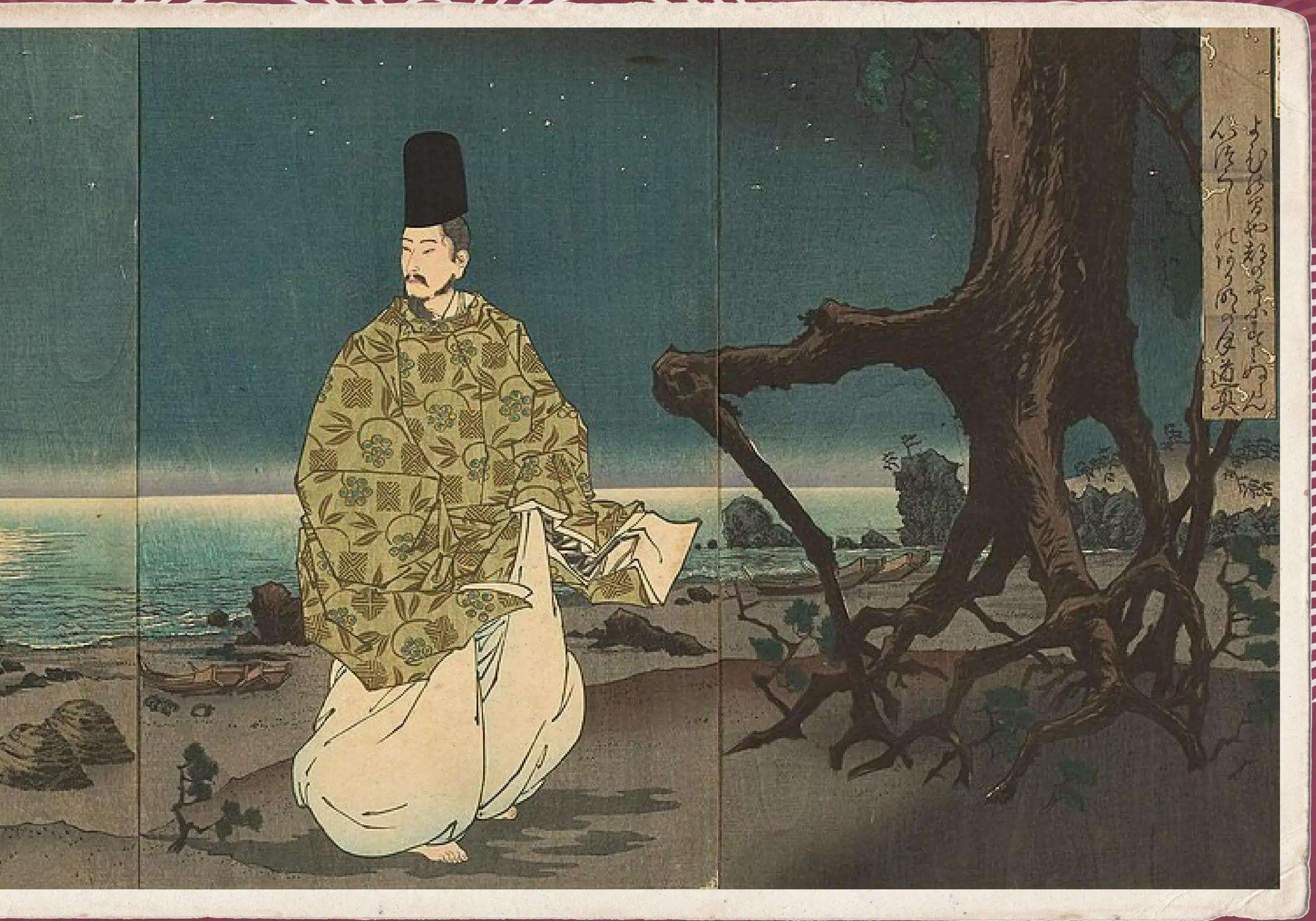
Emperor Sutoku, Taira no Masakado, and Sugawara no Michizane are called the Three Great Onryō. Emperor Sutoku was badly mistreated by the imperial court, and after he died in 1164, awful storms battered the capital, followed by plagues and fires. People saw the fall of the imperial court in the 1180s as the result of Emperor Sutoku's wrath.



Taira no Masakado was a samurai leader in the 10th century. Betrayed by family members, the court condemned him as a traitor when they feared he might overthrow them. People blamed him for a plague and an earthquake after he died, and people still maintain his grave in Tokyo to appease his spirit.

Sugawara no Michizane was a 9th century politician, unfairly sent to a remote posting, where he died. A diviner realised he'd become an onryō following fires, storms, and plagues. After restoring his official record and building a shrine to him, he evolved into a revered spirit. Students still pray at this shrine when they need his help to pass exams. Onryō can be appeased with the honours they deserve.

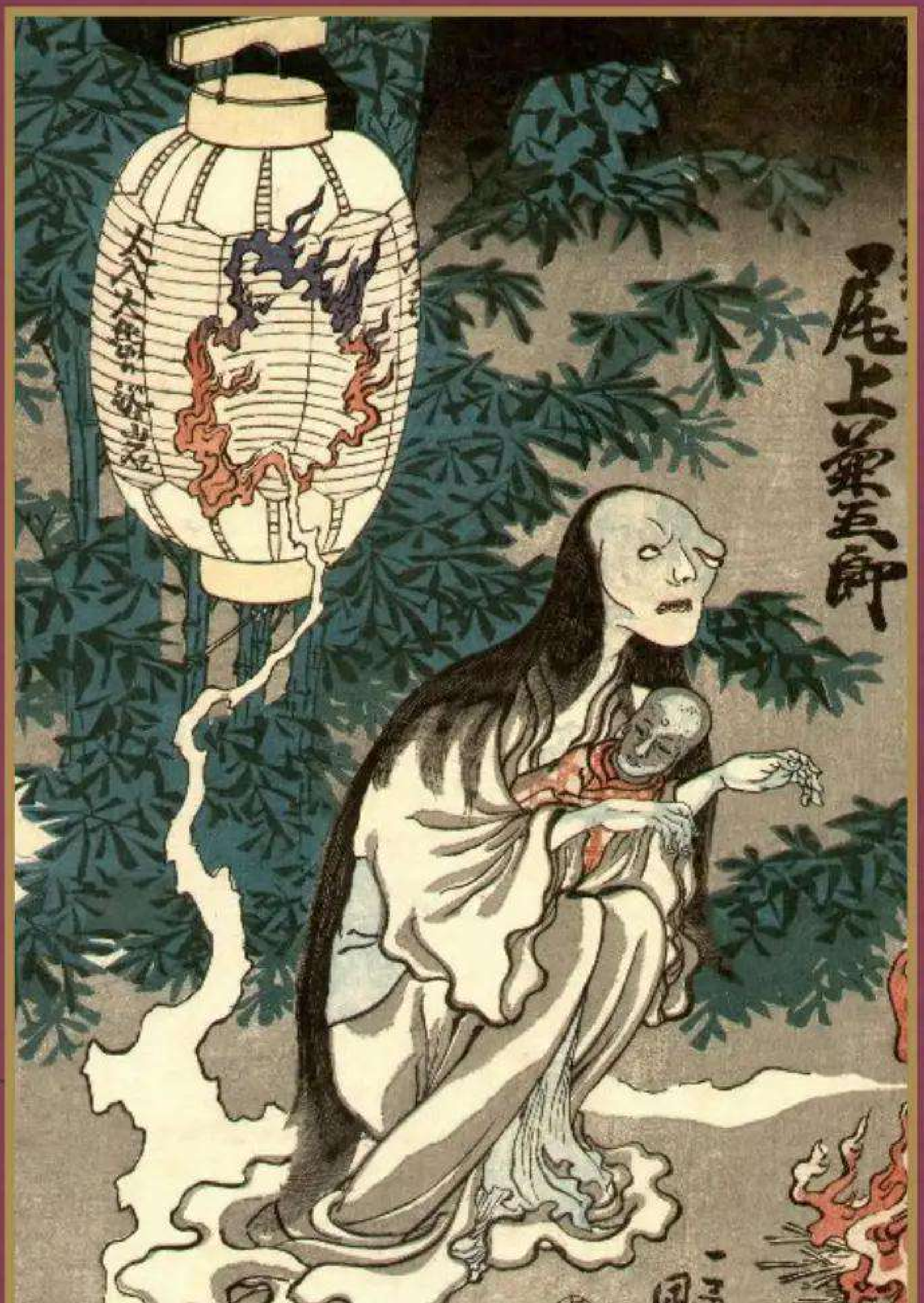
The goryō and tatarigami are types of onryō. The former are spirits of warriors or nobles who died in horrific ways or anyone who died in an accident or under strange circumstances. They brought vengeance on those who wronged them and were often responsible for natural disasters, wars, or plagues. Priests used divination to identify the goryō and then placated them so they abandoned their thirst for revenge and

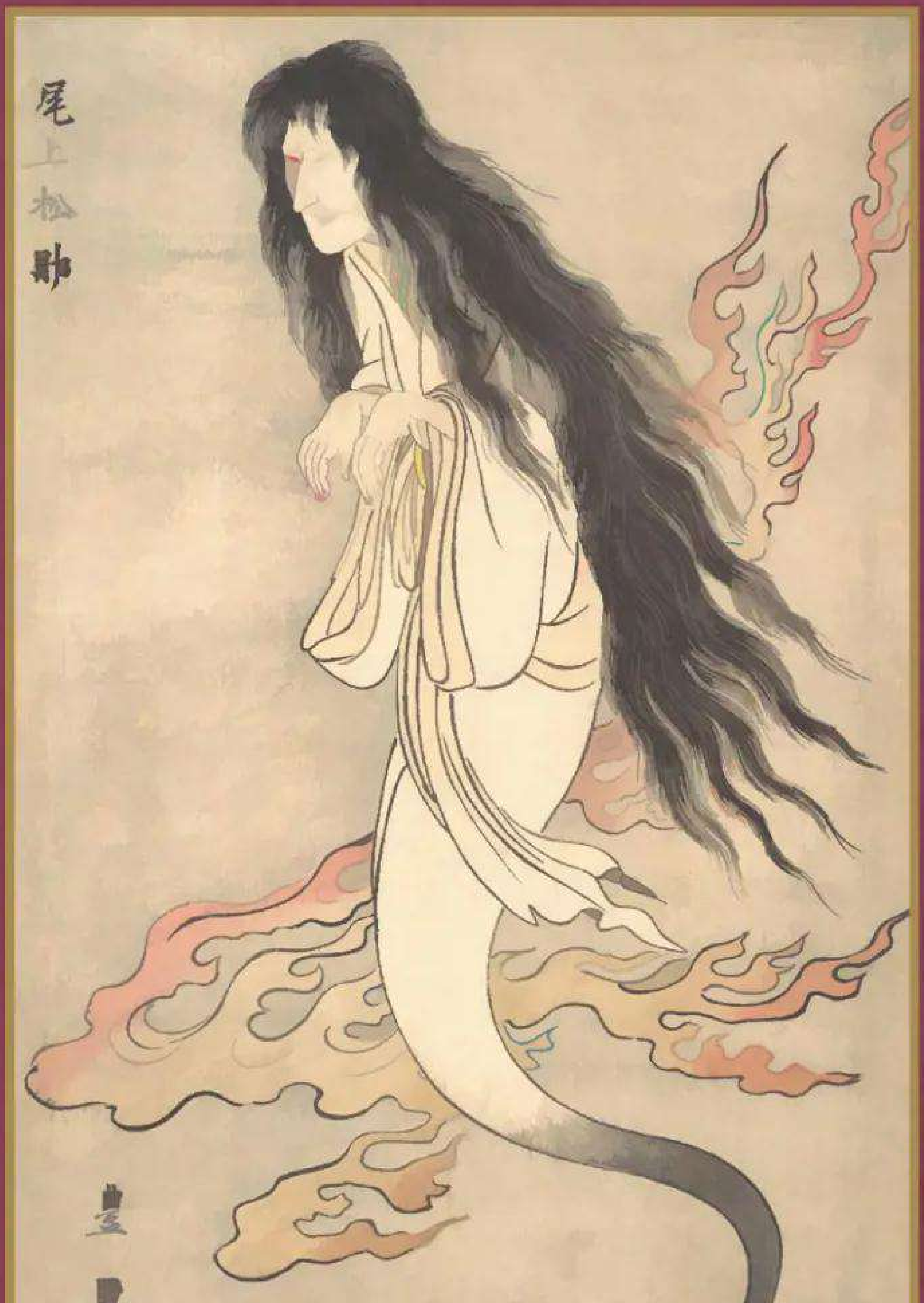


became benevolent spirits. Sugawara no Michizane is sometimes considered a goryō.

Tatarigami can also be a type of onryō, if they were ancient nobles in life. These are immensely powerful yet destructive spirits that wrought plague, famine, war, and other catastrophes. People built shrines in their honour to appease them, often holding annual festivals for them. Emperor Sutoku, Taira no Masakado, and Sugawara no Michizane are also considered tatarigami, as well as onryō and goryō.

Other tatarigami were gods of destruction or disease, such as Susanoo and Emperor Gozu. During the Heian period, the people of Kyōto held a festival for them at the Yasaka Shrine, which they repeated every year to ward off disease.





ABOVE *Sugawara Michizane in Exile* by Kobayashi Kiyochika, 1884

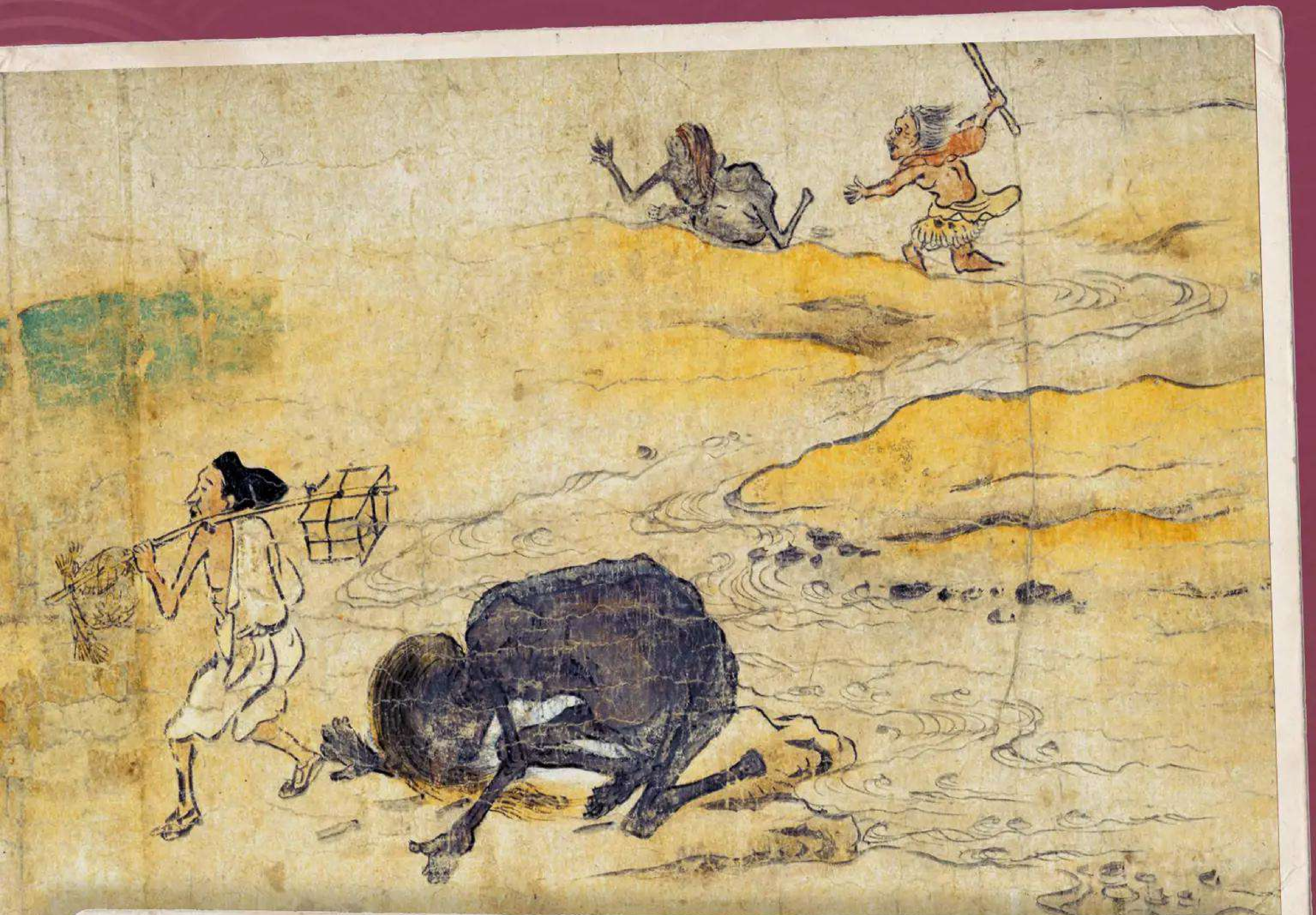
RIGHT Woodblock print of *Onoe Kikugoro III as the Ghost of Oiwa* by Utagawa Kuniyoshi from 1836

FAR RIGHT Art inspired by *Tokaido Yotsuya Kaidan, Onoe Matsusuke as the Ghost of the Murdered Wife Oiwa*

SHIRYŌ AND IKIRYŌ

While shiryō is another word for yūrei, it also only refers to malevolent spirits. The kanji for 'death' appears in their name for good reason. They have existed in Japanese folklore for centuries, and appear to friends or family within moments of the individual passing away. While they may do this to say goodbye, they also try to drag their loved ones into the afterlife. In one legend recorded in 1910, a father's shiryō appeared to his daughter after he died and tried to pull her into the world of the dead. She escaped and spent a month trying to evade her father's ghost every night. Thankfully, he finally stopped trying.

By comparison, the ikiryō is the spirit of a living person. They manifest when the soul leaves the body, which might happen during a near-death experience (making them similar to a crisis apparition). A person might generate an ikiryō if they were consumed by the need to see a specific individual, but intense passion or hatred can also create such a spirit. The legends often deal with the ikiryō created by hatred, although there are stories in which a harmless ikiryō leaves a sleeping person and roams the streets until the person wakes up.



GAKI

The gaki are hungry spirits cursed in some way due to sins committed while alive. Some have tiny mouths so they can't eat, while others can only eat vomit or dead bodies. Others find their food disappears when they try to eat. Gaki can never eat or drink enough to be satisfied.

Recognisable by their massive bellies, gaki bring bad fortune and illness to thwart the living. During the Obon festival, people sometimes leave offerings of rice for the gaki to help ease their pain. Sometimes people use the word to refer to greedy children.

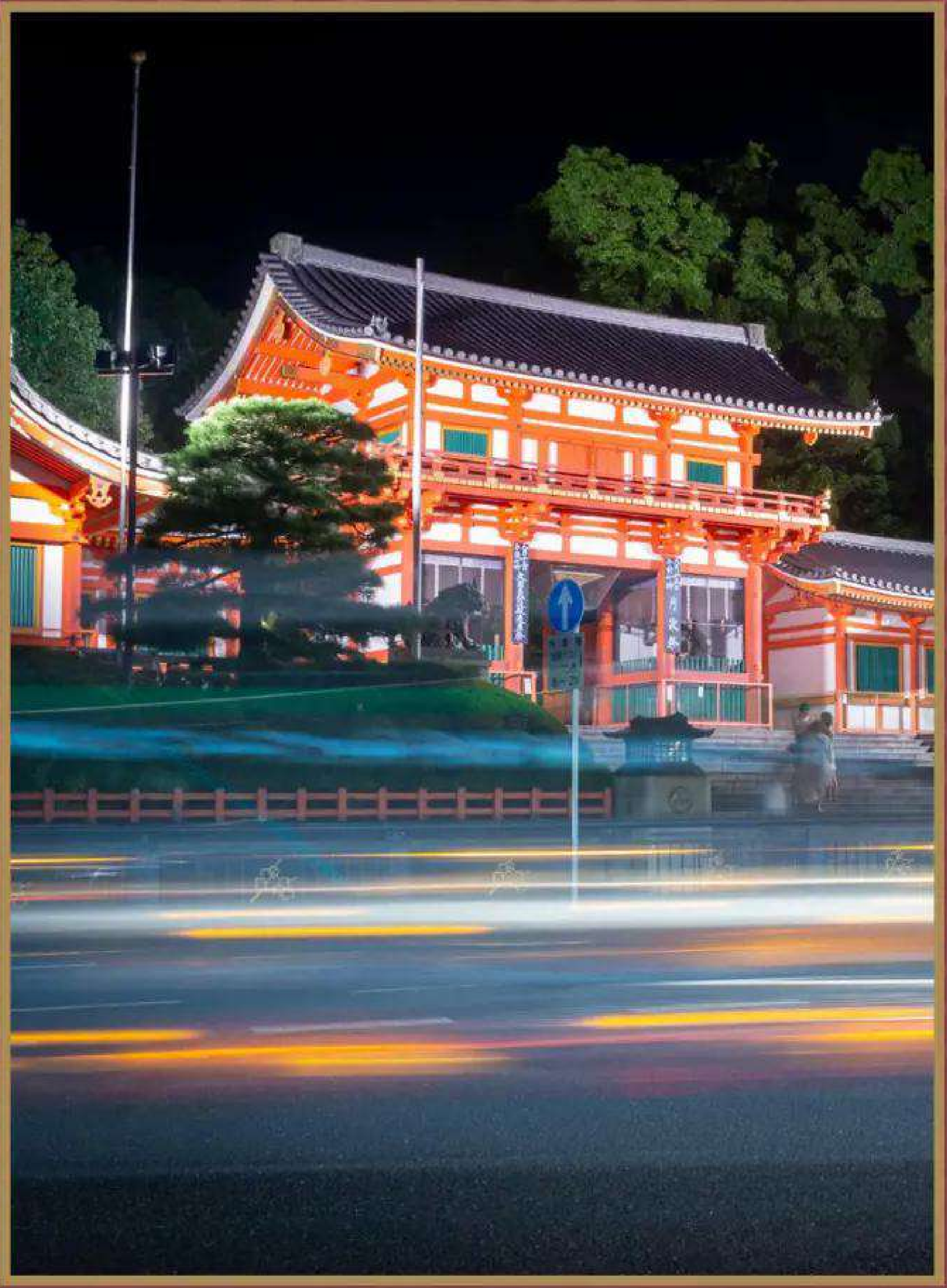
> "THE APPEARANCE OF THE YÙREI IN URBAN LEGENDS SHOWS HOW PREVALENT THESE FIGURES ARE"

YŪREI URBAN LEGENDS

Yūrei also appear in Japanese urban legends. Aka manto relates to toilets and is often associated with schools. In the legend, a student needs to use the toilet, but the nearest is the bathroom rumoured to be haunted. Once they're finished they discover there is no paper, and a stranger asks if they want red or blue paper. If they reply red, the stranger stabs them violently. If they reply blue, they are strangled. You can only escape if you say you don't need paper before running. No one knows who Aka manto is, but in some stories, it is the ghost of a tall, pale man.

ABOVE LEFT First section of the *Hungry Ghosts Scroll* located at the Kyoto National Museum, late 12th century

LEFT This feels like the kind of abandoned bathroom where you might encounter Aka manto. Make sure you tell him you don't need paper



Light trails outside of the west gate of Yasaka Shrine in Kyoto. Yasaka Shrine is a Shinto shrine in Gion

Toire no Hanako-san is another toilet-based urban legend dating to the 1950s, this time about a schoolgirl haunting primary school toilets. You can summon her by knocking on the door to her stall (which varies from school to school) and asking for her. If she answers and you open the door, she will drown you in the toilet. Many variations explain why she haunts the toilet, how to summon her, and how to escape from her.

Teke Teke is a female spirit with no body below the waist. She runs on her hands to chase victims. The legend varies depending on location, but a popular version refers to a woman hit by a train and cut in half. The legend claims you will see her ghost three days after hearing about her. Sorry about that.

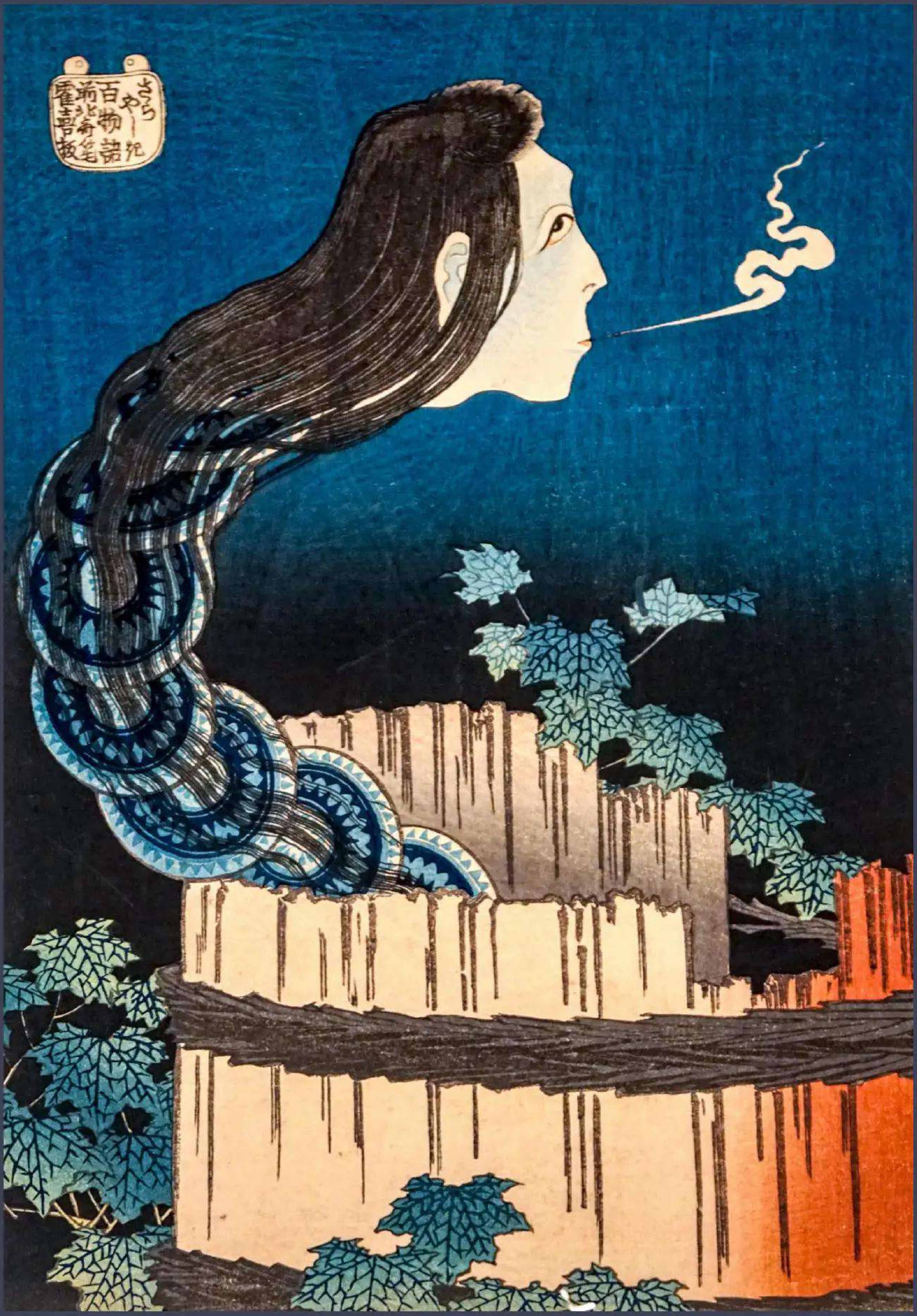
The Kunekune, or 'wriggling body', dates to 2001. It is a white humanoid, appearing to be made of fabric or paper, that wiggles in fields during the summer. Ignoring the Kunekune is the only safe way to interact with it because it kills anyone who comes too close. The story is fictional, although its birth on a ghost story forum meant people became confused about its origins.

The appearance of the yūrei in urban legends shows how prevalent these figures are in Japanese culture, demonstrating an engagement with the dead in everyday life. Appeasing them also shows that working with them as wronged members of the community, rather than treating them as villains or monsters, returns their humanity to them and, perhaps, to ourselves.

OKIKU

THE YŪREI THAT INSPIRED A FILM FRANCHISE

The legend of Okiku inspired Koji Suzuki's 1991 novel, *Ring*. Okiku was a servant, relentlessly pursued by a manipulative samurai. He broke a priceless plate from a set of ten and threatened to blame her unless she married him so she threw herself down a well. Okiku haunted Himeji Castle, counting the remaining plates and wailing when she reached 'nine', unable to move on until she counted all ten. A priest eventually exorcised her by shouting "ten!" while she was counting, allowing her to move on to the afterlife.



An Edo period print depicting Okiku rising from her well, counting plates

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy, Wiki CC Jason Zhang

THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE MODERN WORLD

BELIEF OR ENJOYMENT OF SUPERNATURAL BEINGS ISN'T A THING OF THE PAST, BUT A RICH AND VIBRANT THREAD OF MODERN JAPANESE LIFE

WRITTEN BY **KATE CHERRELL**

While traditional Shinto beliefs regarding yōkai and kami are still practised in some parts of Japan, an active interest and belief in folklore and supernatural beings continues to thrive within the general population. While many supernatural beings may have origins within religions, a general belief and respect for such entities remains culturally ingrained in the fabric of Japan, simply developing and transforming through the generations. Despite an increasingly secular population, a belief in ghosts informs many areas of life, from cleansing land of spirits before buildings are erected to requesting the history of dwellings in case of undisclosed hauntings. One prominent practise regarding supernatural beings is the reverence of ancestral spirits in homes, cemeteries and shrines. These spirits or 'sorei' are believed to dwell on Earth, keeping watch over their descendants and are honoured with offerings and bespoke services of remembrance to thank them for – and encourage – their spiritual assistance.

Ghosts aside, many more fantastical beings are not necessarily perceived as tangibly real, but regarded as an important part of living history and culture. As such, taking part in traditional festivals and dedication ceremonies is a way to engage with one's community and keep a rich social and cultural history alive. Many kami that were once feared, such as kappa (river creatures) and onibi (ghostly orbs), are now the subject of cutesy merchandise, enjoyed by children and adults alike. While beliefs change, their place in society simply readjusts, rather than disappears.

The 2011 Tōhoku earthquake was the largest ever to hit Japan. Lasting just six minutes, it caused nearly 20,000 deaths and thousands of casualties

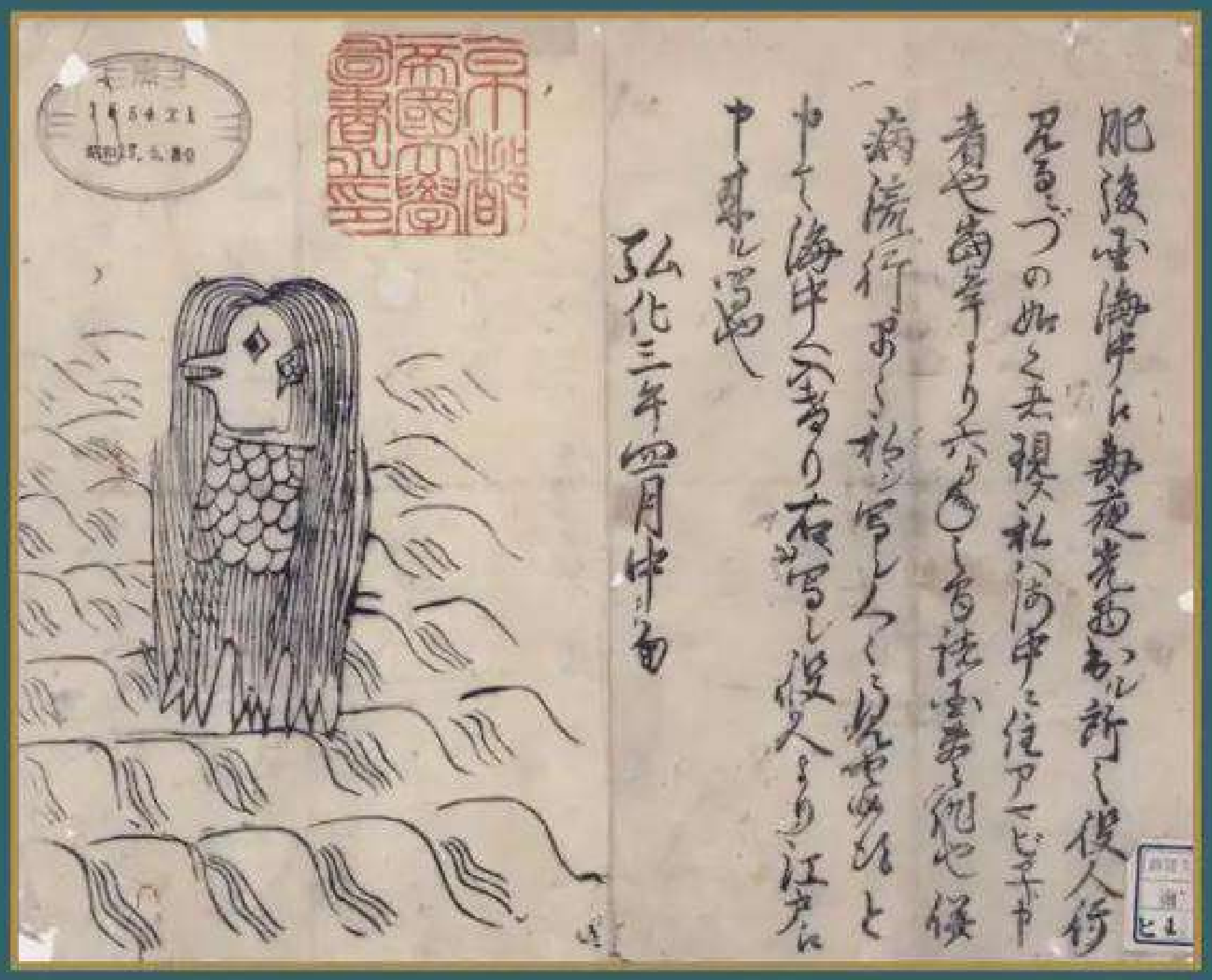
AMABIE: THE PLAGUE MERMAID

WHILE THE REST OF US WERE STAYING INDOORS AND KEEPING OUR DISTANCE, THIS UNASSUMING YŌKAI WENT VIRAL DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

During the worldwide Covid-19 lockdowns, reports of supernatural occurrences skyrocketed as new fears and strange experiences bloomed within communities across the globe. While many people reported strange sounds and sightings in their own houses, believing they had been living alongside ghosts, Japan reported many sightings of the 'plague mermaid'. Amabie is a yōkai taking the form of a beaked mermaid who is said to emerge from the sea to warn of impending illness. Not only a harbinger of doom, the amabie is said to also instruct people to make a likeness of her image to use as a talisman to ward off the spread of sickness.

The first recorded sighting of the amabie was in the 19th century, where woodblock prints were circulated telling of the beast's emergence from the sea, depicting a multi-legged, beaked mermaid with long hair. In 1846, the amabie was said to have spoken to a town official on the seashore of Kumamoto Prefecture, where it predicted six years of bountiful harvests, followed by disease, insisting that its image would prevent the spread. This news was disseminated alongside an image which became the template for all amabie depictions to this day.

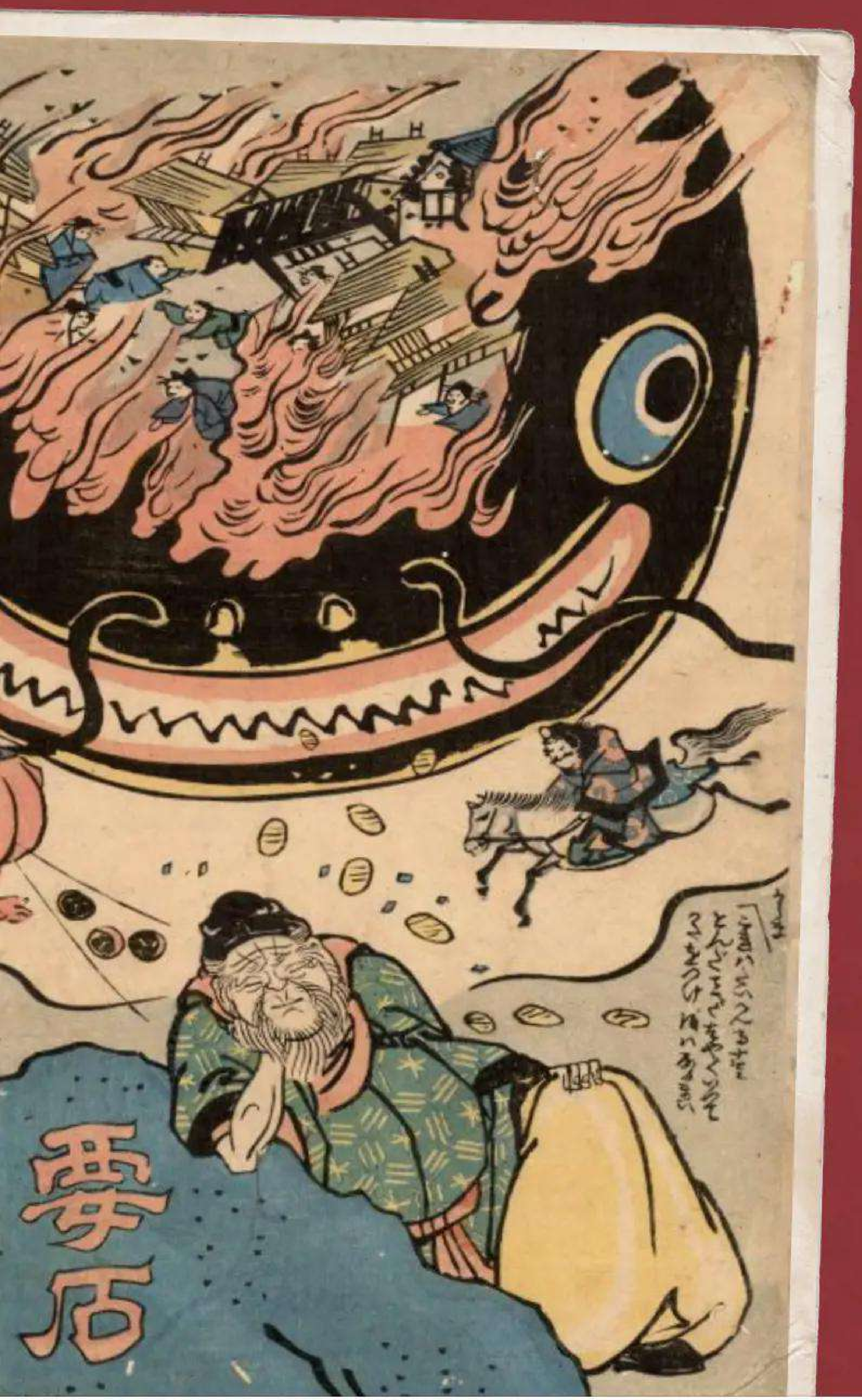
During the Covid-19 pandemic, the image of the long haired mermaid began to circulate online, quickly becoming a symbol of survival and resilience in the face of the virus. First posed as a 'new coronavirus countermeasure' by a Twitter user, the image of the amabie became a familiar symbol of solidarity and resilience in the face of disease. While no amabie was caught on camera, its image was replicated across the country as a nod to their ability to end the spread of diseases, helping to add a little levity to a very unfamiliar situation. Amabie's image was quickly seen on everything from snacks to hand sanitisers and face masks and eventually used by Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare to adorn official signage during the pandemic.



The first sighting of the amabie was circulated on a regional kawaraban (an early newsprint) during the late Edo period

THE GHOSTS OF THE TSUNAMI

FOLLOWING THE 2011 TSUNAMI, MANY SURVIVORS REPORTED SEEING COUNTLESS 'TSUNAMI GHOSTS', AS THE SPIRITS OF DISASTER VICTIMS CONTINUED TO WANDER THE EARTH



Falling asleep while guarding the Namazu's stone, Takemikazuchi unwittingly allowed the catfish to cause the 1855 earthquake that destroyed Edo (modern Tokyo)

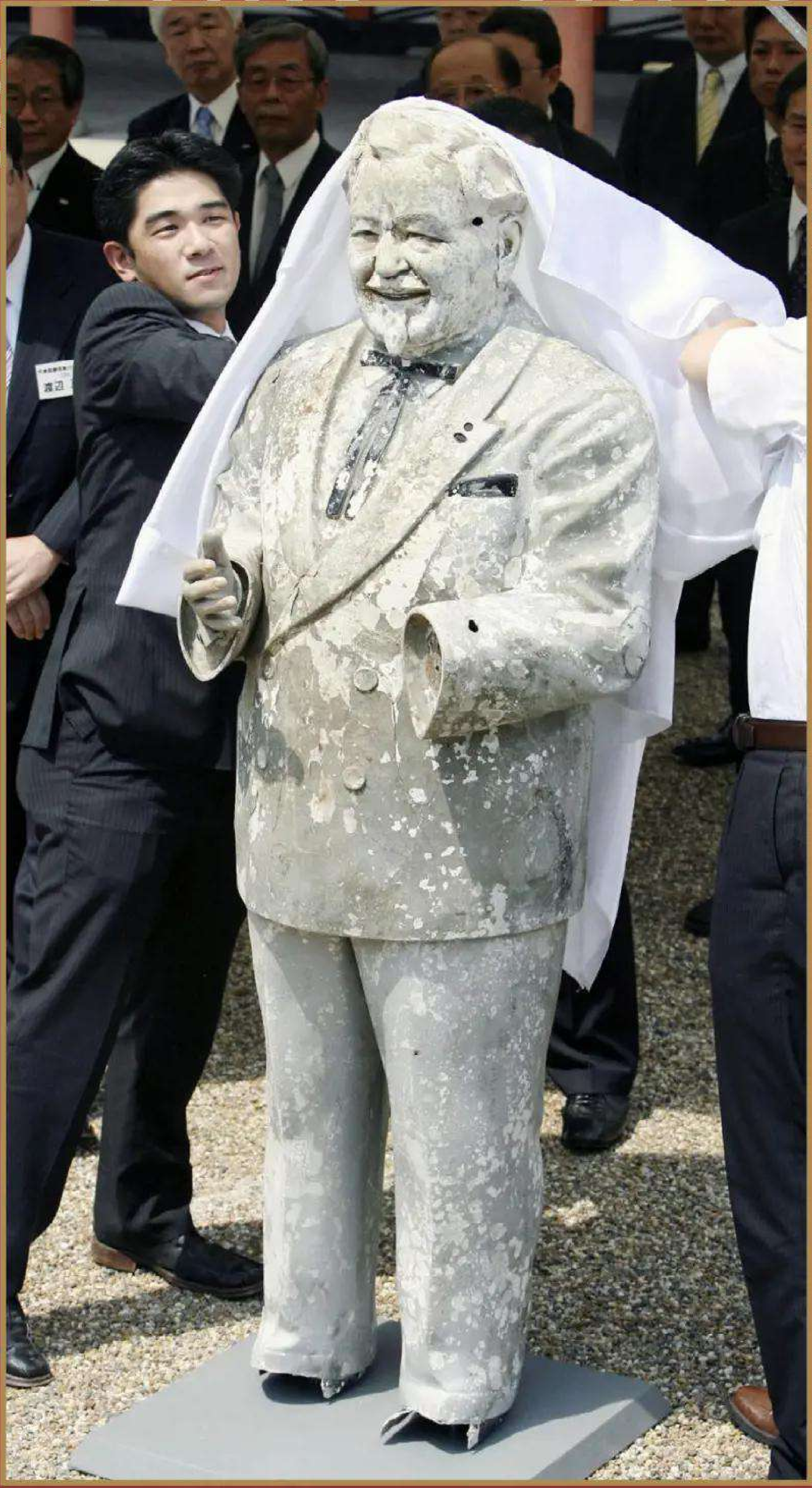
Japan is situated on the boundary of several tectonic plates which, combined with continental drift, forces these plates to push against one another. While much of this movement is undetectable, sometimes they result in earthquakes, which can cause tsunamis. Since Japanese records began, over 140 tsunamis have been monitored, which has led to a loss of over 130,000 lives. Understandably, spiritual and folkloric beliefs have developed around these waves, with records becoming more detailed in recent years. Following the 2011 Japanese tsunami, where approximately 20,000 lives were lost, hundreds of ghost sightings were reported in the most affected zones. Many of these reported spirits weren't angry or mournful, simply listless and lost, often seen standing in roads, wandering through houses or walking around disaster sites. While many believed these mass sightings to be a psychological or spiritual method of coping with grief and loss, others reported vivid and unexplainable interactions. Taxi drivers reported picking up passengers who disappeared into thin air from the back seat, people saw faces of the dead peering back at them from puddles, while others received knocks on their door from visitors who were silent and soaking wet. Many people reported speaking with these ghosts, many of whom didn't realise that they were dead.

While tsunamis are understood as natural disasters today, folklore once placed blame on the mythical Namazu, an enormous catfish who lives beneath the islands, able to cause earthquakes with its movements. Held beneath a stone and guarded by the god Takemikazuchi, the Namazu was thought to flail violently when the god dropped his guard, causing chaos and destruction across Japan.

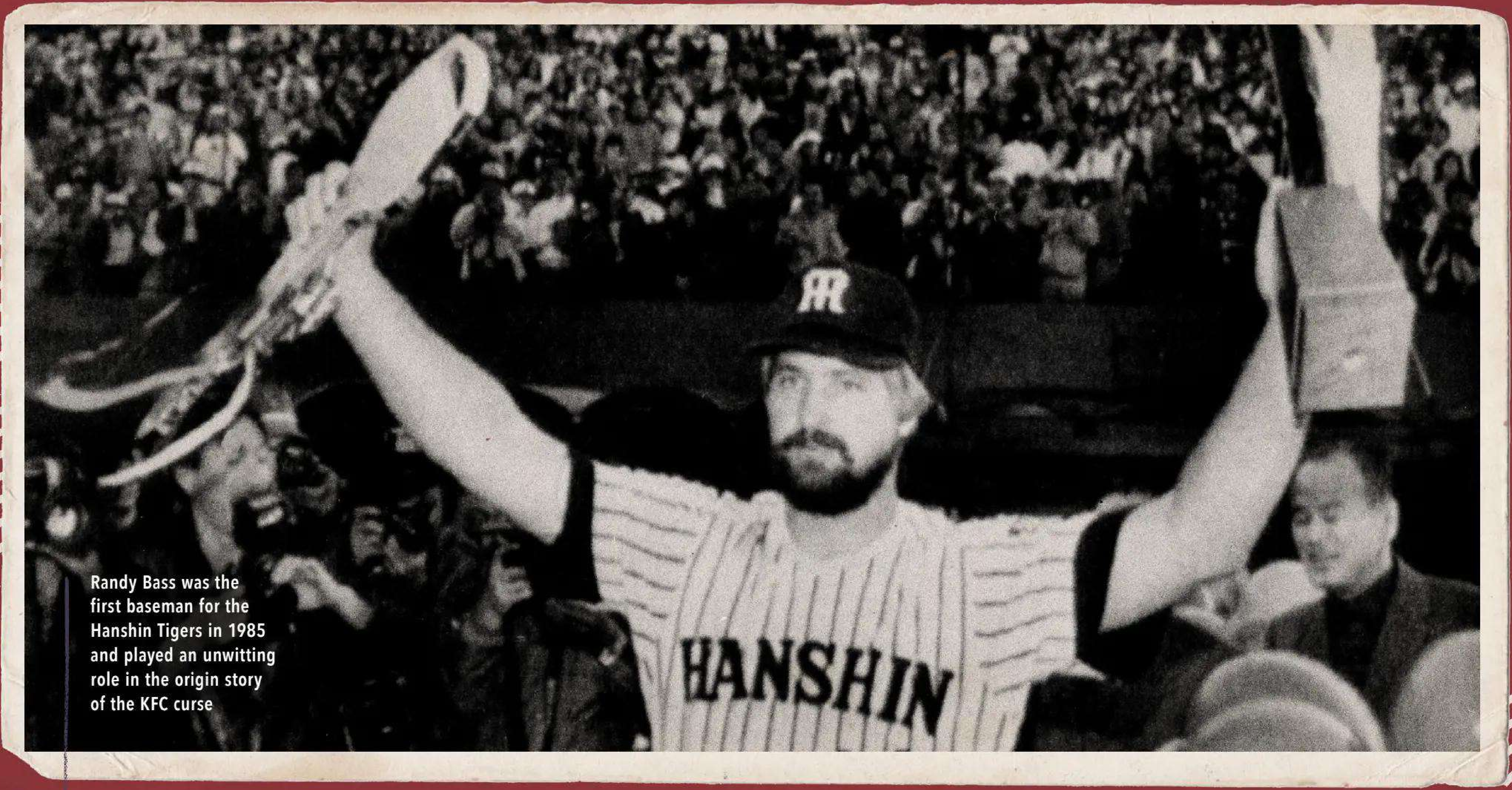
THE CURSE OF THE PLASTIC COLONEL

FOLLOWING AN ACT OF VANDALISM TO A KFC STOREFRONT, THE ANGRY SPIRIT OF KFC FOUNDER COLONEL SANDERS WAS THOUGHT TO PREVENT SPORTING VICTORIES

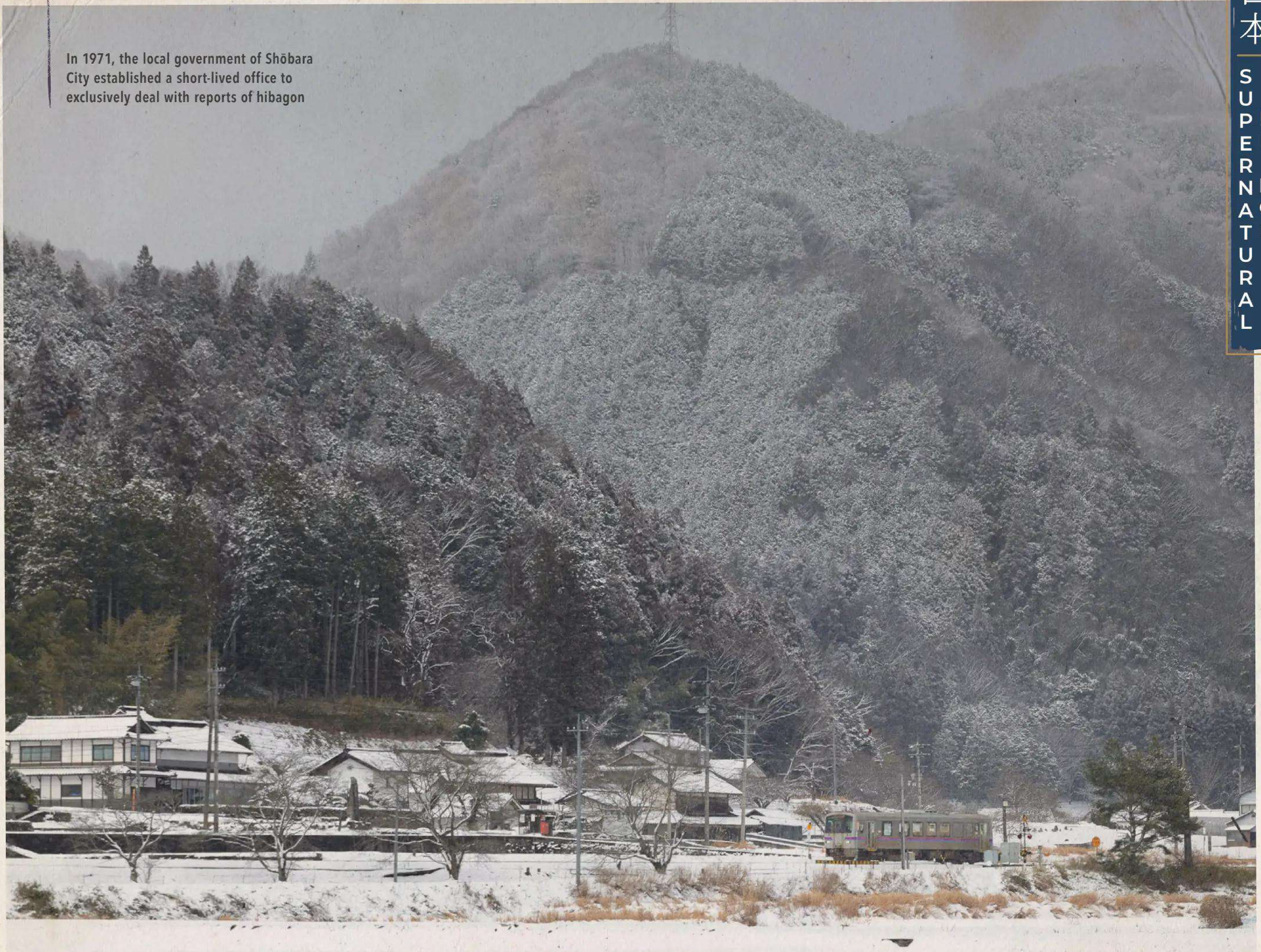
Kentucky Fried Chicken cursed the Hanshin Tigers baseball team. It may sound far-fetched, but the urban legend arising from a simple act of vandalism has endured for over 40 years, when the Hanshin Tigers' failure to top the league was attributed to an angry spirit. Following a riotous victory in the 1985 season, where the Tigers rocketed to the top of the league, some overly-keen fans in Kansai couldn't contain their excitement and took to the streets in revelry. Drinking heavily and giddy from victory, the fans began to sing songs related to each player. After each song finished, a fan resembling that player jumped into the murky river in a jovial – if filthy – act. As the songs progressed with their doppelganger divers, they soon realised that one player, Randy Bass, didn't resemble anyone in the crowd. Struck with a brilliant idea, they ran to the nearest KFC and stole the large Colonel Sanders statue that was situated outside. Kidnapping the plastic Colonel, they sang Bass' song before hurling the figure into the river. As the statue sank beneath the surface, it's said that his spirit put a curse on the baseball team, preventing them from ever achieving the dizzying heights of victory. Considering that the Tigers won the 1985 CL Pennant, the Colonel's curse may have had a time-delay, but nonetheless, they failed to replicate their successes for years afterwards, finally winning the series championships in 2023. The legend of the Colonel's curse was well known and feared by some, and the statue itself was eventually removed from the river in 2009 and retuned to KFC Japan. While the Hanshin Tigers have won several titles since, periods of failure are still frequently attributed to the Colonel's curse.



Sadly, the Colonel had degraded beyond repair, and on 8 March 2024, KFC Japan held an official burial service for the infamous statue



Randy Bass was the first baseman for the Hanshin Tigers in 1985 and played an unwitting role in the origin story of the KFC curse



In 1971, the local government of Shōbara City established a short-lived office to exclusively deal with reports of hibagon

MODERN CRYPTIDS

REPORTS OF NEW AND TERRIFYING CRYPTIDS CONTINUE TO THIS DAY, WITH JAPANESE MONSTER HUNTERS ATTEMPTING TO TRACK THESE UNEXPLAINED AND ELUSIVE CREATURES

Not all strange demons and monsters are confined to the history books. Sightings of mysterious and supernatural creatures continue today, weaving their way into the living folklore of Japan.

THE HIBAGON

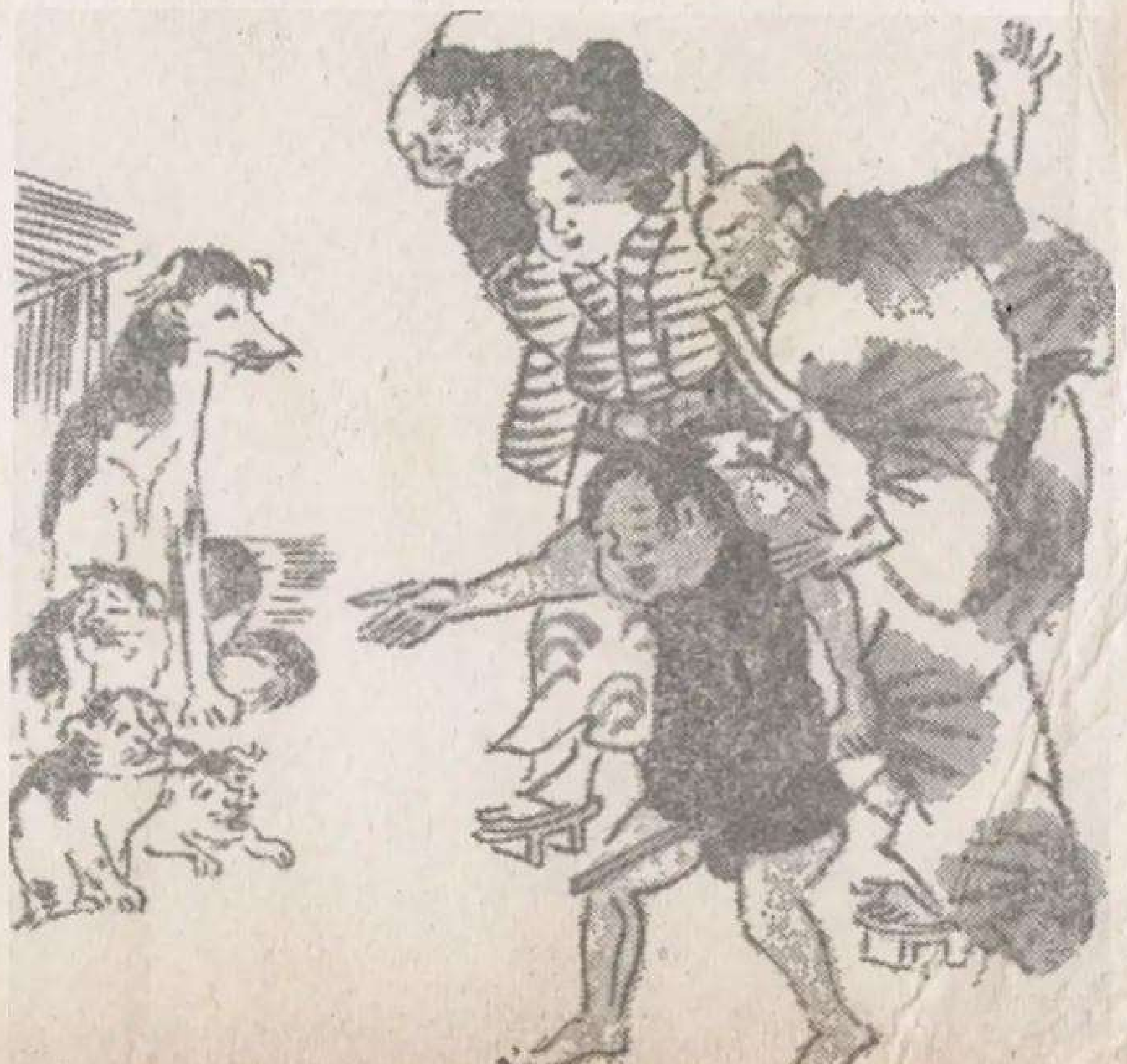
Much like the North American Bigfoot, the hibagon is a large, hairy, humanoid cryptid, spotted on several occasions since 1970. Often described as gorilla-like, the true nature of the hibagon continues to be a subject of discussion. It has been posited that it is an undiscovered ape creature, an army deserter, or more sinister still, a human being who mutated following the Hiroshima nuclear attack. Most reports describe the hibagon as being an ape-like creature, covered in brown hair and measuring approximately 5 feet tall with piercing eyes. Sighted around the Chūgoku region, no hibagon has ever been captured, however a group of Boy Scouts once reported seeing large footprints, attributing them to the beast.

THE JINMENKEN

Not all dogs are man's best friend. A jinmenken is a terrifying man-faced dog, first reported in the Edo period (1603-1868) and believed to be the spirits of negative events or even genetic experiments. They are able to speak and are unpleasant in conversation, being rude and loathing the company of humans. Thankfully, although they look horrible, they aren't vicious beasts and would do little more than chase traffic. Like many cryptids, they are sometimes regarded as omens of misfortune or death, and are accompanied by a feeling of dread.

Many people report seeing jinmenken today, particularly when taking their rubbish out to the bin, where the strange cryptids lurk like urban foxes. While these sightings are often dismissed as being macaque monkeys, some people insist on the existence of the man-faced dogs.

Jinmenken were especially popular during the age of travelling shows, where so-called taxidermied jinmenken were displayed as proof of the cryptid's existence.



IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

MAGIC & SUPERSTITION IN JAPAN

ESOTERIC BELIEFS HAVE FLOURISHED IN JAPAN FOR CENTURIES, FORMING A VIBRANT PART OF THE COUNTRY'S RICH HISTORY OF BELIEFS, TRADITIONS AND FOLK TALES

WRITTEN BY **KATE CHERRELL**

Like many countries, Japan's population is increasingly secular, but remains entrenched in the uniquely Japanese national practice of Shinto, in which traditions of magic and supernatural belief are commonplace. The practice of magic in Japan can be traced back for thousands of years with over 350 variations of magic identified as a means of enlightenment, divination, or sheer amusement. Alongside these developing spiritual and magical beliefs is a long and rich history of folk tales, where heroic protagonists rage against ogres and spurned women curse their love rivals with elaborate rituals.

KATAIMI AND DIRECTIONAL TABOOS

Kataimi and katatage ('direction changing') are a method of geomancy, closely linked to the yin-yang path, which was introduced to Japan from China, and developed into a uniquely Japanese practice called Onmyōdō. Geomancy is a broad term that encompasses many forms of divination, using geographical features to inform predictions and decision making. Practices such as feng shui – in which environments are arranged to promote positive energy flow – informed the development of kataimi, which was popular with nobles during the Heian period of the 8th century. Kataimi involves divination methods that are influenced by dates and times, and studies of the astrological calendar where the movements of deities are monitored. Through this practice, lucky and unlucky days and locations were identified and followers of this belief were expected to change their lives accordingly. If one was planning to travel, 'directional interdictions' (kataimi) could signal bad fortune or evil supernatural beings would be encountered. As such, changes in direction (katatagae) were regarded as both a spiritual and general necessity. These rituals could be complicated and prohibitive, but were of great help when wanting to find reasons to move house, or to avoid welcoming guests.

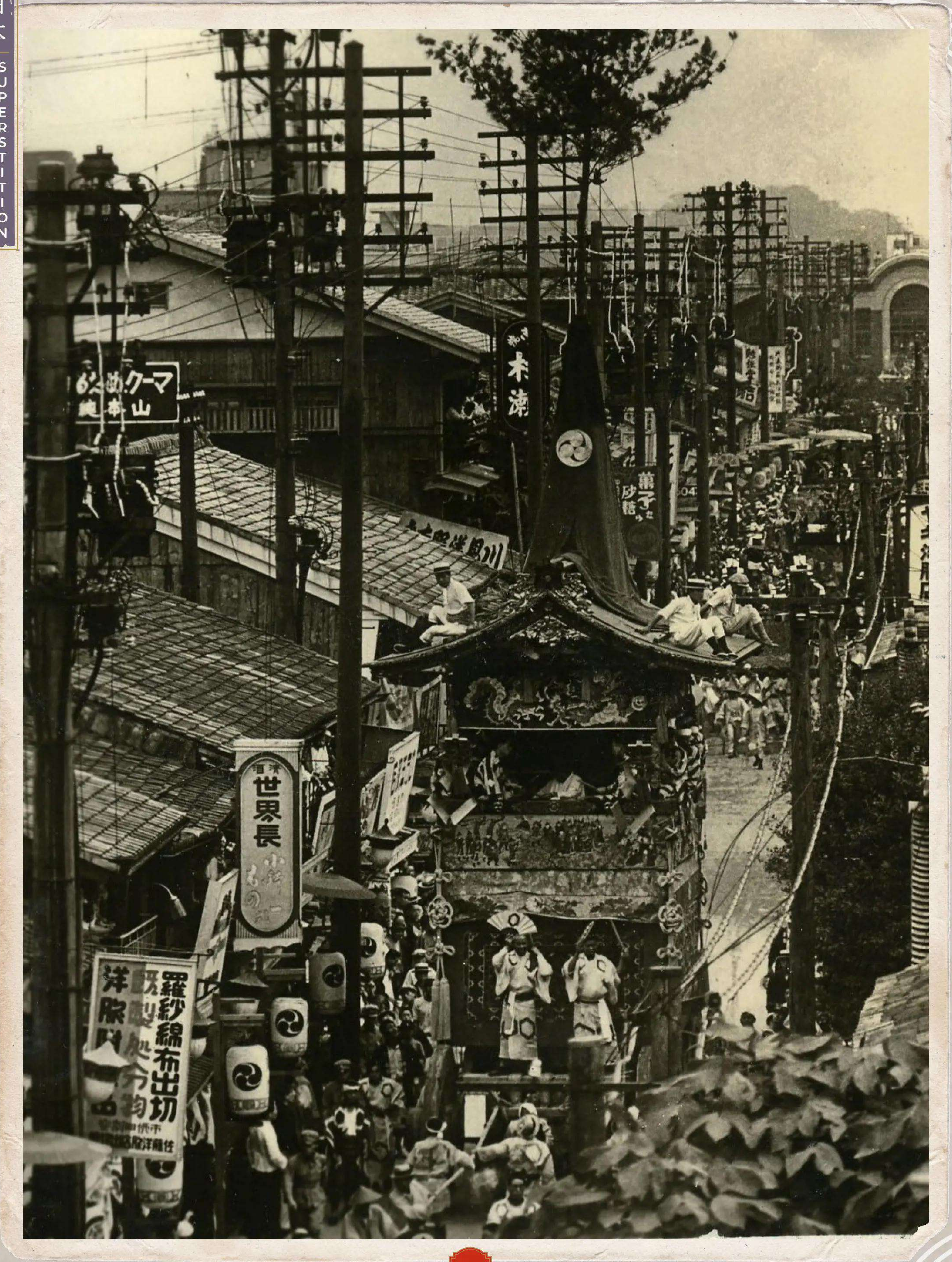
ONMYŌJI AND ONMYŌDŌ

Onmyōdō is an ancient art form and belief system largely informed by astrological calendars and celestial divination, where practitioners gain knowledge about the future and the personal affairs of others. Onmyōdō was formed from a conglomeration of different established religions, including Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism, which joined with Goryō and Shinto beliefs to

"THE PRACTICE OF MAGIC CAN BE TRACED FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS"

Signs showing the hammer of Uchide no Kozuchi are often affixed to temples as signs of good luck

金運
高尾山
江戸
梅田
小板橋
広秋


世界長
羅紗綿布出切
砂糖
菓子

create a unique system of belief and practice. Predominantly regarded as a method of astronomy and calendar science, it blended recognisable religious rituals with more fantastical occult claims. Onmyōdō beliefs cover many avenues of fortune telling and magical rituals, including the banishing of evil forces and illness, protective acts, and even placing curses on enemies, which made practitioners a popular member of the imperial court.

Those who performed the divination methods and were trusted to act in the role of spiritual advisors were called onmyōji. These men played prominent roles in the decisions made by officials on a national scale. One such famous onmyōji was Abe no Seimei, a court official and legendary figure of the Heian period who acted as an advisor to the emperor. Seimei also had several tales written about his magical powers, with some claiming that his mother was a fox spirit (kitsune) and that he could command demons since childhood. The belief of Onmyōdō was outlawed in 1870 and deemed a superstition, however it was permitted once again following the abolition of State Shinto in 1945.

OFUDA

Ofuda are a familiar sight across Japan's Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples, where slips of paper are sold as talismans for use over the coming year. Attached to doors, walls or ceilings, ofuda are charms imbued with the power of the shrine, which are brought into home altars (kamidana), and welcome spirits into the household. Ofuda are simple and recognisable objects, constructed in a particular order whereby the name of a kami or shrine is written on a piece of wood or card. Afterwards, the object is imbued with the power of the kami through a ritual, making it a sacred talisman which cannot be treated with anything but reverence. The ofuda is then wrapped in protective paper and taken into the household where it cannot be unwrapped for fear of destroying its power. It is recommended that ofuda are displayed in groups of three; one being from Ise Jingu – a shrine complex known as the 'soul of Japan' – the second being from the nearest local shrine and the third being from an ancestral shrine. However, these suggestions are not laws, and many households hold a variety of ofuda from different shrines. After a year, the ofuda need to be disposed of. Being sacred objects, this isn't a simple matter, and they must be returned to shrines, where they are reverentially burned.

TATARI AND APPEASING DEMONS

Not all ancient magic is positive and helpful; for every blessing, there may be someone battling an evil and destructive curse. Tatari, or tatarigami, are spirits that can be conjured or battled as they attempt to wreak destruction and death against their enemies. Tatarigami are some of the most powerful and feared spirits in all of Japan, and have played substantial roles in the development of the country's religious and political landscape.

Tatarigami can be both spirits of the deceased (particularly famous and powerful people), nobles who died in unpleasant ways, or even gods themselves. The power of the tatarigami was considered a present threat for many centuries, and many shrines have been built across Japan with the express intention

JUJUTSU KAISEN

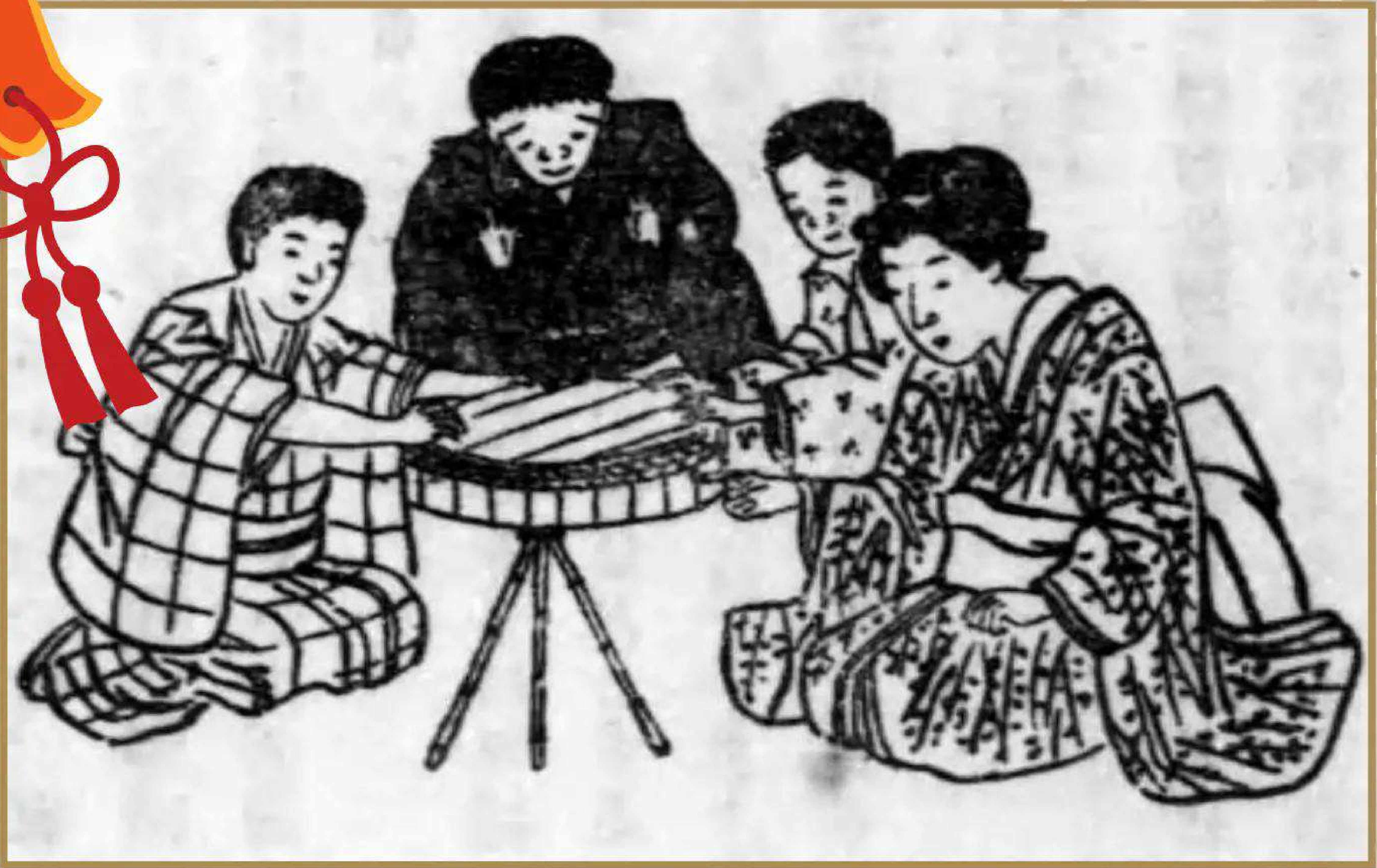
THIS 30-VOLUME MANGA IS ONE OF THE BEST-SELLING SERIES OF ALL TIME

Jujutsu Kaisen is a popular manga series chronicling a teenager's training in jujutsu sorcery, as a secret organisation battles against an ancient curse.

It'll be a massacre!

Popular with cosplayers, Jujutsu Kaisen's protagonist Yuji is eventually overtaken by the cursed being, Ryomen Sukuna

FAR LEFT The Gion Matsuri festival is famous for its richly decorated floats, which are paraded through the Gion district on 17 and 24 July



BELOW In traditional Kokkuri, some people believed the colour of the cloth had an influence on the device, with white and gold being used for preferable results.

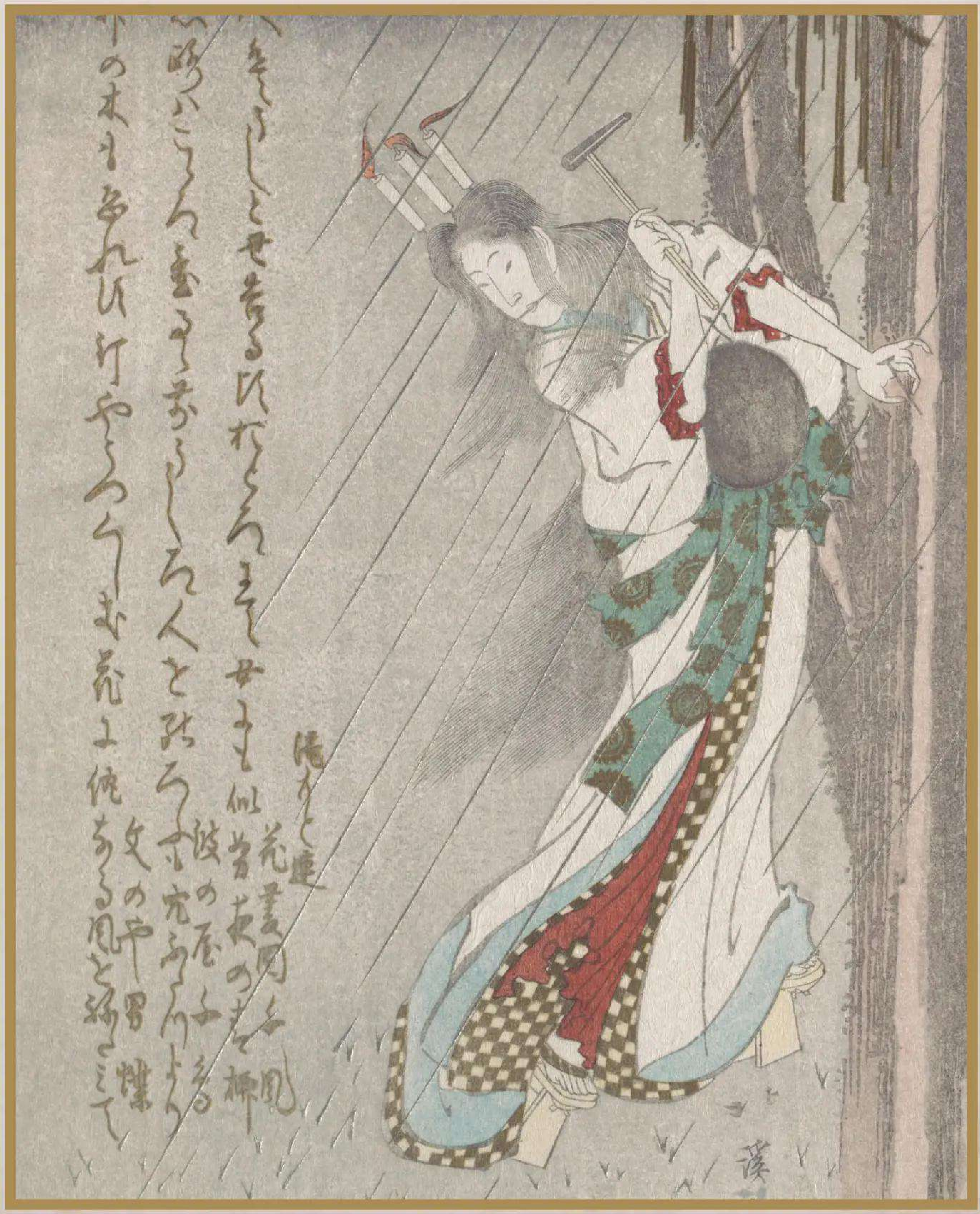
> "OFUDA ARE CHARMS IMBUED WITH THE POWER OF A SHRINE AND WELCOME SPIRITS INTO THE HOUSE"

of appeasing them and their powerful curses. Historically, outbreaks of disease, death and misfortune were blamed on the fury of tatarigami, many of whom were identified as powerful demon gods, such as Yamata no Orochi, a multi-headed dragon and Gozu Tennō, a god of both disease and healing. The Gion Matsuri, or Gion Festival, is one of the most popular festivals in Japan and takes place in Kyoto every July when festivities take over the entire month. While the modern festival is a riot of colour, performances and parades, it originally started as a small purification ritual in the year 869 to appease tatarigami following outbreaks of disease. To continue this banishment of disease, the festival was made an annual event and has continued to this day, although its roots are seldom acknowledged.

USHI NO TOKI MAIRI AND LAYING CURSES

As a scorned woman, putting a curse upon another isn't a simple task. When using traditional Japanese techniques such as ushi no toki mairi, times and methods have to be closely adhered to, in order for the curse to fall as you wish. Ushi no toka mairi literally translates as 'ox-hour shrine visit', meaning that the ritual has to be completed in the hours of the ox, deemed to be between 1 and 3am. Ritual dress is also required, as a white dress must be worn, a mirror is placed around the neck, and one must be crowned with an iron ring holding three burning candles (in many stories, this is an upturned kitchen trivet). To command the curse, nails must be hammered into a sacred tree, or in other variations, the nails are hammered through a straw effigy representing the target, and into the tree behind. After repeating the ritual for several consecutive days, the curse will be activated and the target will perish. However, when committing these acts under cover of darkness, one must be careful not to be seen, as any other person witnessing the act would immediately void the curse and all its power would be lost. While this tale of setting curses became popular in the Edo period, the most famous incarnation is a medieval legend, titled the *Hashihime of Uji* (the 'Princess of the Bridge of Uji'). In this tale, the daughter of a nobleman conducted the curse ritual and wished to become a demon in order to murder her love rival. Following revelations from the local shrine spirit, she ultimately received her wish and became a powerful supernatural being, destroying her love rival and countless others, becoming a terrifying beast, who hunted samurai and lived long beyond any human lifespan.

> "KODOKU IS A FORM OF BLACK MAGIC PERFORMED BY WOMEN"

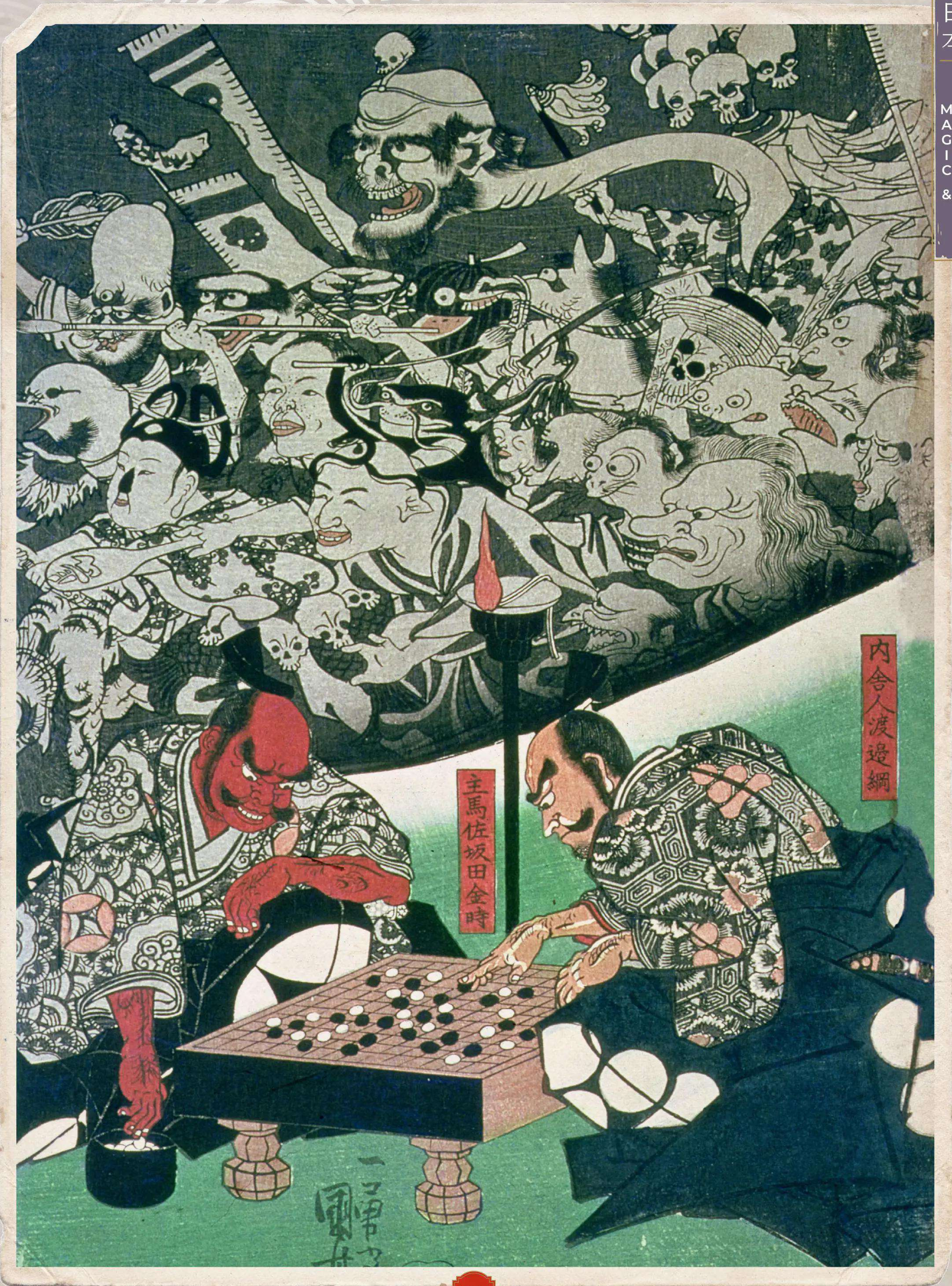


ABOVE In summoning the curse of ushi no toki mairi, it is believed that the place struck or pierced on the straw doll would be the site of pain or injury.

RIGHT Part of a woodblock print depicting the Earth Spider spinning its web of monsterous demons in the mansion of Minamoto no Yorimitsu a.k.a Raikô

KODOKU AND DARK MAGIC

Every society with a history of magical ritual has its light and dark sides, and Japan is no different. Kodoku is a form of black magic, performed by female practitioners, and involving countless insects. The primary kodoku ritual involves gathering several different kinds of venomous insects and sealing them inside a jar, whereby they are expected to fight to the death. When all the insects are dead, save for one victor, that creature is removed and its poison used to either kill, curse or control a target. Deriving from Chinese 'gu' magic, this poisonous magic was popular during the Nara period between 710-794, where the victorious insect was expected to be kept as both a good luck charm and object of reverence. After the insect's venom had worked on the target, it was expected that the practitioner should repay the creature in food. However, not adequately compensating the insect could result in complete destruction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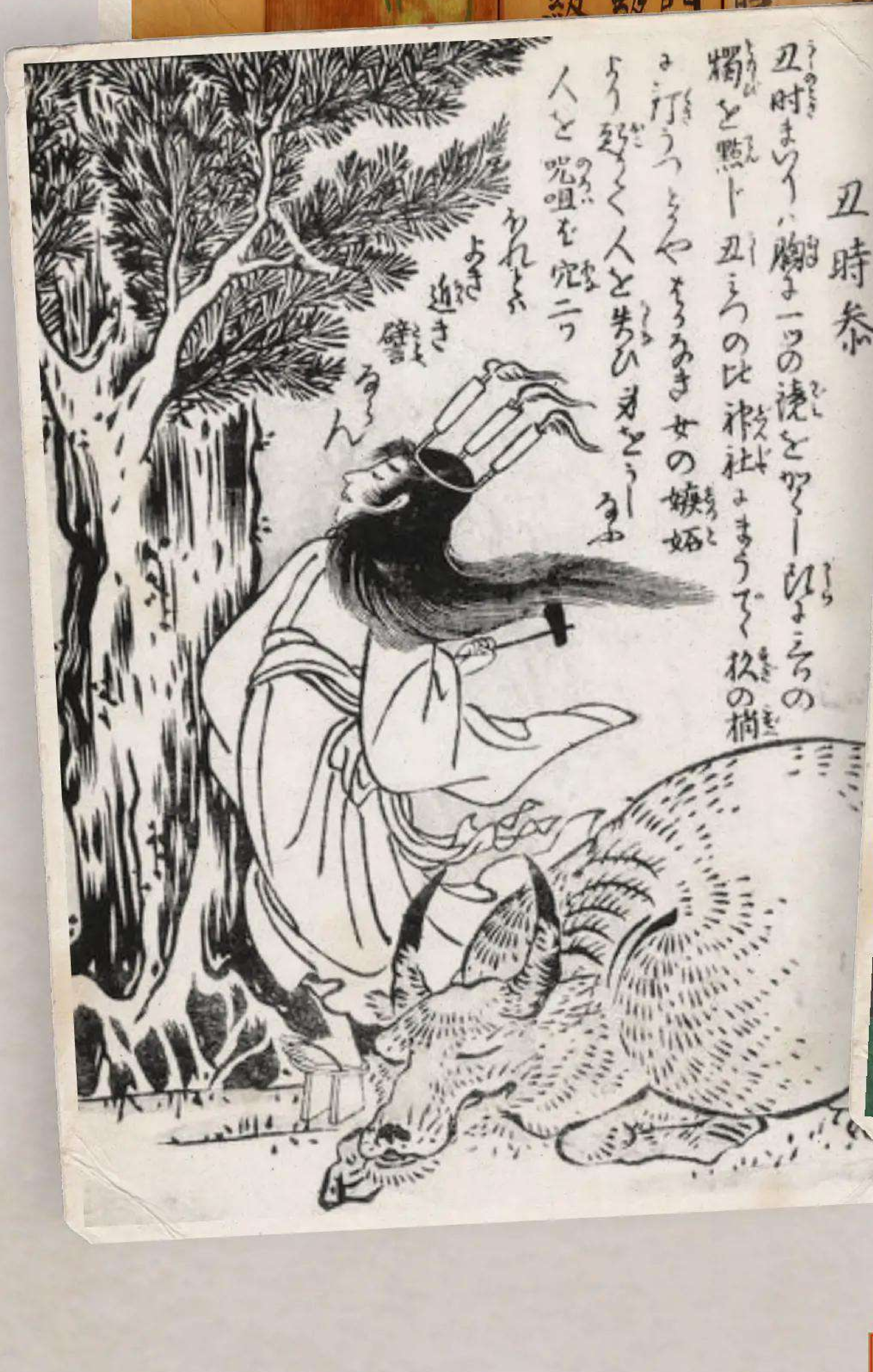
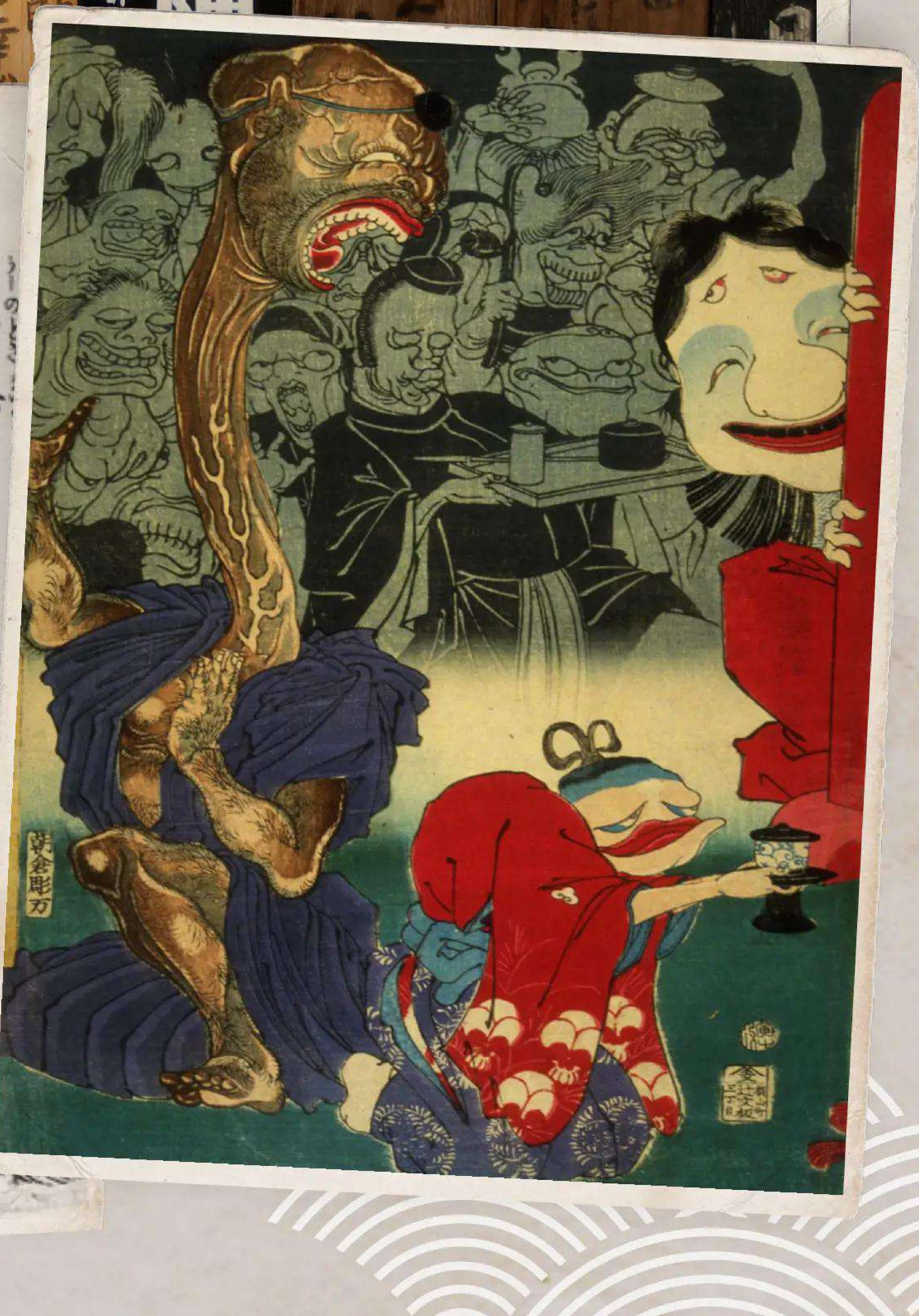
謡曲仕舞教室
木曜日（月二回）
観世流能楽師 浦部幸
おはよう倫理塾・西陣
◇毎朝5時～5時45分
家庭倫理の会 京都

TOP Ofuda have many uses, from protection to exorcism, and are commonly given as gifts between families and friends

BELOW LEFT Requirements of the uishi no toki mairi vary across sources, with some stating a comb should be held in her mouth, or the use of five inch nails

BELOW RIGHT A shapeshifting badger yōkai in the form of a demented yamabushi “mountain warrior” accompanied by demons





of the curse-bringer, as the insect may revolt and consume them. The magic has its own balance of power.

Other variations of kodoku rituals include frogs and toads, and even conducting rituals for more personal and sexual benefits.

KOTODAMA AND THE POWER OF WORDS

As part of the Shinto religion, kotodama is the belief that words themselves have spirits, and can therefore possess positive and negative powers. Literally translated as 'spirit of language', this Shinto belief suggests that all words are imbued with divine power and can have physical effects on objects, environments and the physical and mental wellbeing of others. Even speaking a person's name out loud can directly impact their life. In mythology, this power of words is demonstrated in the story of the sibling gods Susanoo and Amaterasu, who use words in the ukehi Shinto ritual to immediately produce results. In this instance, Amaterasu births five sons, demonstrating both the power of words in ritual, and her brother's pure intentions. The power of words, whether through imbued magic or intention, is acknowledged in many smaller sects and martial arts groups. Similarly, aikido was founded on principles of kotodama, where the practice of the martial art was viewed as a method by which to employ kotodama and ultimately find complete freedom and divine nature within oneself. The concept of kotodama has been reinvented across Japanese history to fit varying political and societal needs. Based within beliefs of preserving a 'pure' Japanese language, free from foreign influence, this concept was revived during the Second World War, when kotodama was promoted as a means to strengthen national identity and unity. Today, the concept of kotodama is not closely followed, but used in debates concerning foreign or 'loan words' in the Japanese vernacular.

UCHIDE NO KOZUCHI

The uchide no kozuchi is a popular motif in Japanese arts and a unique element of folkloric history, functioning similarly to Aladdin's lamp. Translating as 'lucky mallet' or 'small magic hammer', this small item plays a prominent role in many ancient legends, where it is able to grant wishes and restore order. The tale of Issun-bōshi ('one-inch boy') tells of a short boy who leaves home and is employed by a powerful feudal lord who happens to have an attractive daughter. Despite his diminutive stature, he is asked to accompany the daughter on a journey and act as protection. Despite his efforts, the pair are attacked by an oni, who swallows Issun-boshi whole. However, from inside the beast, the boy pricks the demon with his sword, causing it to flee and spit out the boy. In his haste, the oni drops the uchide no kozuchi, which the boy takes back to the palace and uses to produce mountains of riches. Now popular, he is able to marry the girl where, in modern incarnations, she uses the magic mallet to grow him to full size. In other folk tales, such as within Momotarō's stories (translated as 'Peach Boy', he is a popular hero in traditional tales) the mallet is noted as one of many magical items once owned by the ogres of Onigashima, alongside an invisibility cloak and hat, and floating and sinking shoes. Uchide no kozuchi are frequently seen on consumer products today as lucky talismans and symbols of prosperity, while the hammer itself is most commonly believed to be in the possession of Daikokuten, one of the seven gods of luck.

KOKKURI, THE JAPANESE SPIRIT BOARD

Appearing remarkably similar to the American Ouija board, the kokkuri board shares a similar function – it is believed to be the catalyst through which one can speak to spirits. The board is decorated with Japanese characters, including 'yes' and 'no', and is topped with a red torii gate. Popularised during the Meiji era, it is both a game and a means of divination. Kokkuri is an onomatopoeic name, meaning to nod up and down, referring to the motion of the players' hands when communicating with the board.

Traditionally, a tripod of bamboo rods topped with a small covered dish is placed on a table, while players place their hands or fingers on the edge of the dish. Much like the table-tapping of the Western Spiritualist movement, spirits are then commanded to move the legs beneath the plate to indicate positive or negative responses.

Modern methods have changed dramatically from its traditional incarnations, appearing near-identical to the Ouija board. In playing today, a ten yen coin is used as a pointer or planchette, and players each place one finger on the disc, and call out to Kokkuri-san. If successful, the coin is said to move and be able to answer questions, while the players make sure to ask the coin to return to the gate after each response. Much like the rules of Western Ouija boards, there are suggested rules of play, including never to play alone or disrespect the board. Rather unlike Western boards, the kokkuri isn't seen as a gateway to the afterlife, but a means of communicating with the spirit of Kokkuri-san themselves, a mischievous spirit believed to be a combination of a fox, raccoon and dog.

A modern yamabushi, practioner of shugendo (or mountain worship), wearing traditional costume

"SHINTO BELIEF SUGGESTS THAT ALL WORDS ARE IMBUED WITH POWER"

BLACK MAGIC AND JUJUTSU

While magic and sorcery was a mainstay of the imperial court, the consequences of performing black magic ('jujutsu') were severe. In records from the 1st century, a man named En no Ozunu was exiled for this very act, and was accused of summoning and binding spirits with dark spells, forcing them to labour for him. Ozunu took to the mountains in the province of Kii, an area known to be rife with kami, and settled amongst the spirits and occasional pilgrims. Groups of ascetics often retreated to the mountains to train, particularly groups known as yamabushi and shugenja, who based their beliefs on a blend of Shinto, Buddhist and Daoist doctrine. While the yamabushi have roots dating back to the 7th century, years later, they began to claim that their beliefs were laid out by an ancient figure named En no Gyoja, later revealed to be En no Ozunu (see page 82). While Ozunu's magical actions of ensnaring kami and demigods presented him as a questionable figure, developments across the centuries resulted in the cultivation of an overwhelmingly positive figure who became divine through his time in the mountains. En

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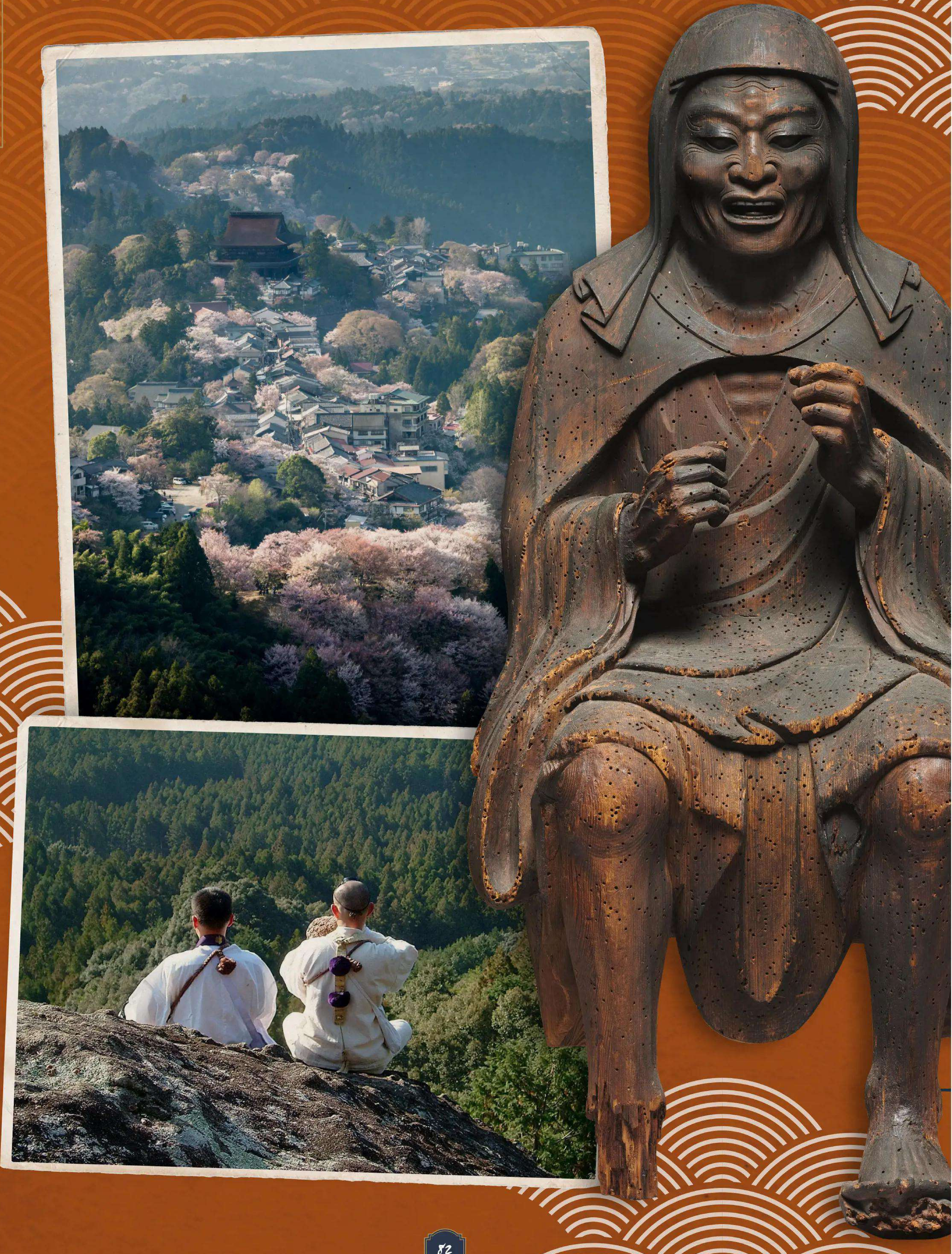

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THE WIZARD OF THE WOODS

WAS EN NO GYOJA A POWERFUL WIZARD, CAPABLE OF FLYING, SUBDUING GODS AND WALKING ON WATER? OR 'SIMPLY' A RELIGIOUS PIONEER WHOSE MYSTERIOUS, NINJA-INSPIRING WAYS WERE BOUND TO GET TONGUES WAGGING?

WRITTEN BY **KATE PUTTICK**

The man born as Kamo-no-e-no-Kimi (known as En No Gyoja or the pilgrim), entered the world between 634 and 701 CE, in central Japan. Some say he was born with a flower in his hand or able to speak from day one. What we can gather is that he was a gifted student - gifted enough to be sent to practise with an esteemed religious order, soon becoming known for his superlative apothecary skills.

DANGEROUSLY POWERFUL

So famed were his talents in healing – and the burgeoning following he gathered from his ascetic mountain wanderings – that it became inevitable that suspicions about the gifted healer would arise, ultimately leading to a sentence of exile by the wary Emperor Monmu on the basis of concerns over his outsized influence. The explanations for why and how this punishment was dealt is perhaps where myth creeps into the narrative to fill in the gaps…

MAIN A wooden figure of En No Gyoja from 1185-1333, a time in which Shugendo's hold reached new heights

TOP LEFT En No Gyoja's Kinpusen Temple, in a valley said to have inspired Japan's blossom festivals

BOTTOM LEFT Yamabushi following in the footsteps of En No Gyoja

THE ROAD TO EXILE

Some legends say that the path was set when Ozunu, at age 34, abandoned his home, to allow it to be made into a temple to the Bodhisattva Miroku (a manifestation of the Buddha). One day, while wandering, he found a giant's skeleton holding two precious objects, a vajra (a kind of wand used in Buddhism) and a bell. While praying, Ozunu had a vision of Miroku who told the monk that he could attain these objects by learning the 'Mantra of the Peacock King'. One bonus of doing this was, conveniently, the ability to fly. Once he had adequately recited the mantra to an acceptable degree while continuing his path, he was able to return to the skeleton and claim the coveted bell and vajra – symbolising a level of practice few could attain.

BUILDING BRIDGES

The hi-jinks of Ozunu's path to fame continued, as Ozunu went about the next few years variously rehabilitating, befriending and offending deities (kami) and yokai, amassing more followers, and flying around the province between heaven and earth amid the mountainous backdrop of central Japan. But things took a bad turn when, looking to build a bridge to aid the path of his nomadic disciples, Ozunu enlisted the help of the kami Hitokotonushi. Unfortunately Ozunu was none too happy with the god's workmanship, in terms of the small issue of Hitokotonushi only wishing to work at night, due to self-esteem issues. The exasperated Ozunu, arguably somewhat ungratefully, threw the shy god into a ravine. Enraged, Hitokotonushi took his humiliation to Emperor Monmu, falsely claiming that Ozunu was seeking to raise an army against him. Exiled, he broke the terms of his sentence by flying back to Mount Fuji. Spotting him, all attempts to attack and execute the flying monk failed – with weaponry breaking as they made contact.

LEGACY

History or myth? What we do know is that, as centuries went on, and the tales consolidated, some began to credit En no Gyoja with being the founder of the Shugendo religious order, a major movement in Japanese culture whose mountain-climbing followers – the Yamabushi – can be found treading the paths of Ozunu and others to this day.

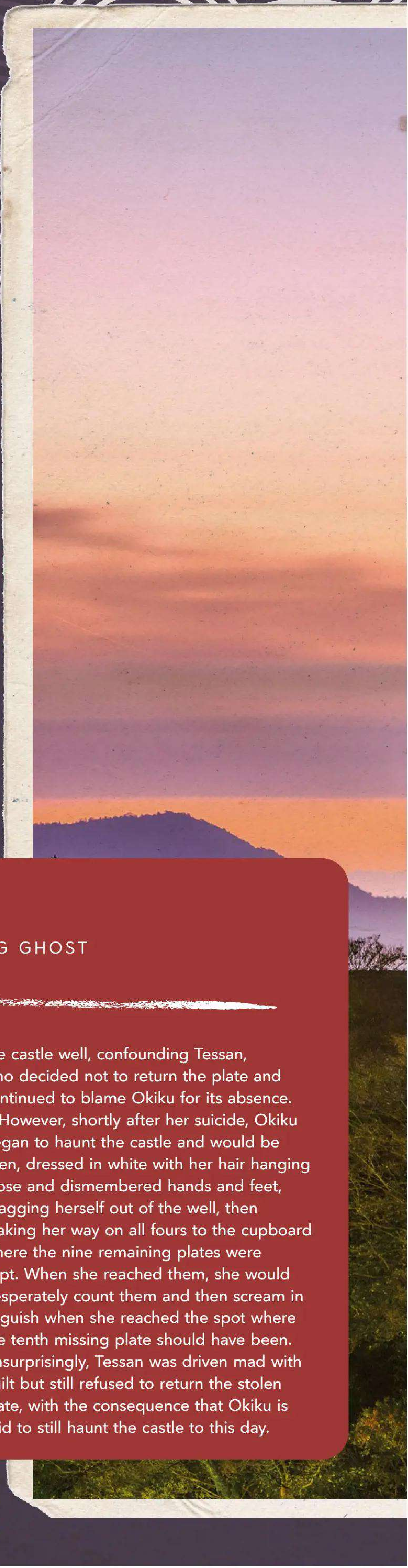
> "SO FAMED WERE HIS TALENTS THAT IT BECAME INEVITABLE THAT SUSPICIONS ABOUT THE GIFTED HEALER WOULD ARISE"

LORE-FULL LOCATIONS

DO YOU DARE VISIT THE THREE MOST MONSTROUS AND MYTHICAL SPOTS JAPAN?

WRITTEN BY **MELANIE CLEGG**
AND **ALICE PATTILLO**

With such a rich history of superstition and mythology, Japan is rich with folklore and urban legends that exist to this day. Travel across the land of the rising sun and you will hear tales of mysterious monsters, rumours of ghastly ghosts and fantastic folklore that are begging to be explored. However, there are a few legendary locations that are more infamous than most and a must-visit for anyone interested in the country's mythical past…



HIMEJI CASTLE

A BEAUTIFUL JAPANESE CASTLE IS THE LOCATION FOR THE CHILLING GHOST STORY THAT INSPIRED THE TERRIFYING HORROR FILM *THE RING*

Himeji Castle, first founded in 1333, is so beautiful that it is commonly also known as 'White Heron Castle' because its elegant, distinctive white facade is said to resemble a heron soaring through the sky. However, despite its tranquil appearance, Himeji was designed for war.

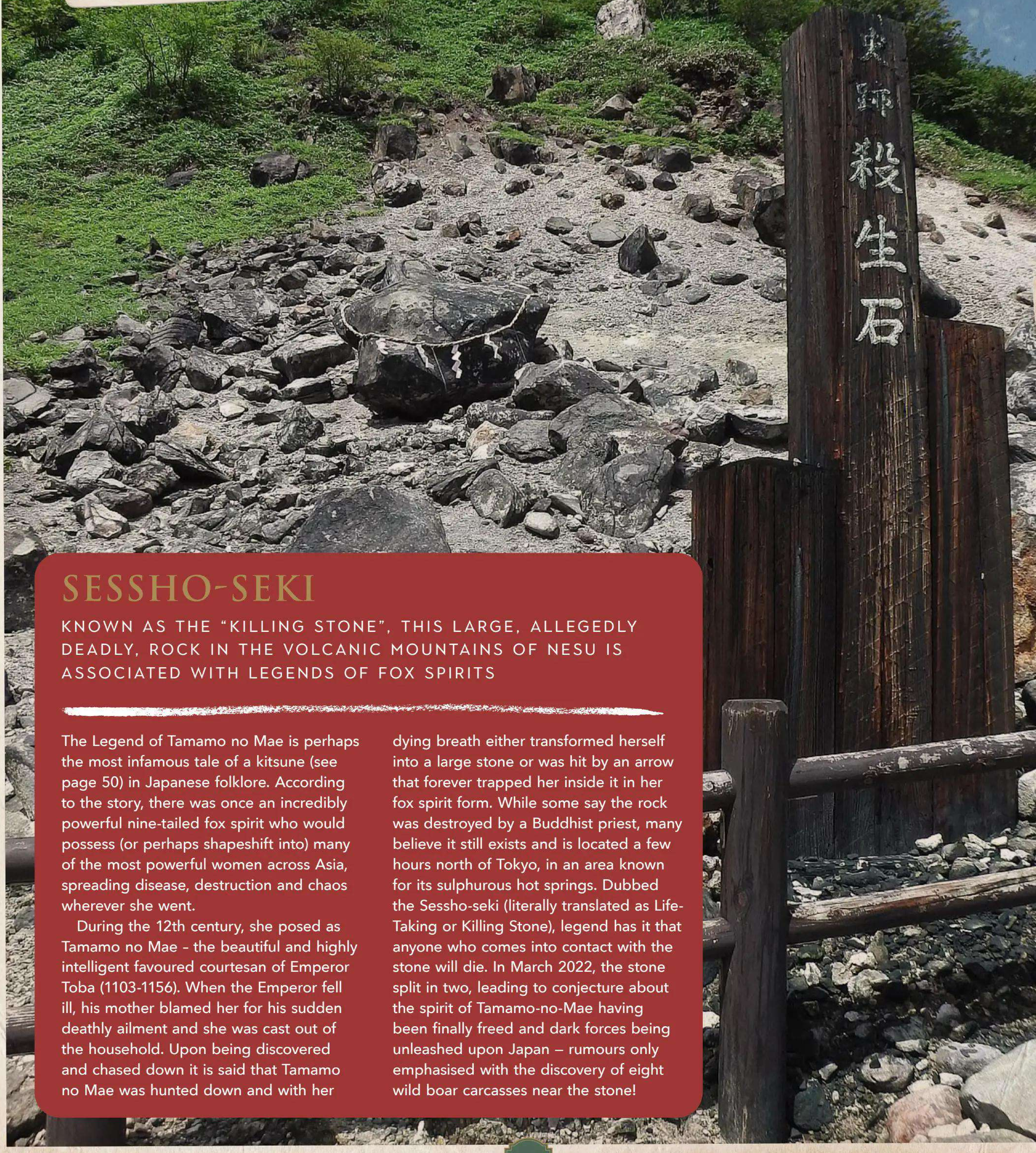
The castle boasts a unique defensive system that involves multitudes of loopholes allowing defenders to rain arrows down on their attackers, as well as a perplexing maze of paths around its keep and walkways that go back on themselves. Meanwhile, the distinctive Kawara ceramic tiles on the roof are also said to be imbued with magical properties intended to keep evil spirits at bay and protect the building's inhabitants from attack.

However, despite this magical protection, Himeji is also said to be the location for one of the most famous Japanese ghost stories: that of Okiku and the well. There are several versions of the legend, but one of the most common is that the beautiful maidservant Okiku caught the eye of her master, Tessan Aoyama, who tried to make her his mistress behind his wife's back. When Okiku refused, he hid one of his wife's precious plates, which Okiku had the honoured job of looking after, and told the unfortunate girl that if she did not agree to his request, he would tell her mistress that she had stolen it.

Unable to find the hidden plate and terrified of her mistress' anger, the distraught Okiku threw herself down the castle well, confounding Tessan, who decided not to return the plate and continued to blame Okiku for its absence.

However, shortly after her suicide, Okiku began to haunt the castle and would be seen, dressed in white with her hair hanging loose and dismembered hands and feet, dragging herself out of the well, then making her way on all fours to the cupboard where the nine remaining plates were kept. When she reached them, she would desperately count them and then scream in anguish when she reached the spot where the tenth missing plate should have been. Unsurprisingly, Tessan was driven mad with guilt but still refused to return the stolen plate, with the consequence that Okiku is said to still haunt the castle to this day.

Beautiful Himeji Castle in Japan gets its nickname, 'White Heron Castle', from its pristine white exterior and resemblance to a graceful bird in flight



In 2022 the infamous stone mysteriously split in two, leading to urban legends about Tamomo no Mae being freed from her stony prison

SESSHO-SEKI

KNOWN AS THE "KILLING STONE", THIS LARGE, ALLEGEDLY DEADLY, ROCK IN THE VOLCANIC MOUNTAINS OF NESU IS ASSOCIATED WITH LEGENDS OF FOX SPIRITS

The Legend of Tamamo no Mae is perhaps the most infamous tale of a kitsune (see page 50) in Japanese folklore. According to the story, there was once an incredibly powerful nine-tailed fox spirit who would possess (or perhaps shapeshift into) many of the most powerful women across Asia, spreading disease, destruction and chaos wherever she went.

During the 12th century, she posed as Tamamo no Mae - the beautiful and highly intelligent favoured courtesan of Emperor Toba (1103-1156). When the Emperor fell ill, his mother blamed her for his sudden deathly ailment and she was cast out of the household. Upon being discovered and chased down it is said that Tamamo no Mae was hunted down and with her dying breath either transformed herself into a large stone or was hit by an arrow that forever trapped her inside it in her fox spirit form. While some say the rock was destroyed by a Buddhist priest, many believe it still exists and is located a few hours north of Tokyo, in an area known for its sulphurous hot springs. Dubbed the Sessho-seki (literally translated as Life-Taking or Killing Stone), legend has it that anyone who comes into contact with the stone will die. In March 2022, the stone split in two, leading to conjecture about the spirit of Tamamo-no-Mae having been finally freed and dark forces being unleashed upon Japan – rumours only emphasised with the discovery of eight wild boar carcasses near the stone!

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy, ウィキ太郎 Wiki Taro

AOKIGAHARA FOREST

KNOWN AS "THE SEA OF TREES", THIS INFAMOUS WOODLAND HAS A REPUTATION OF BEING HOME TO THE YŪREI AND IS TRAGICALLY ONE OF THE WORLD'S MOST USED SUICIDE SITES

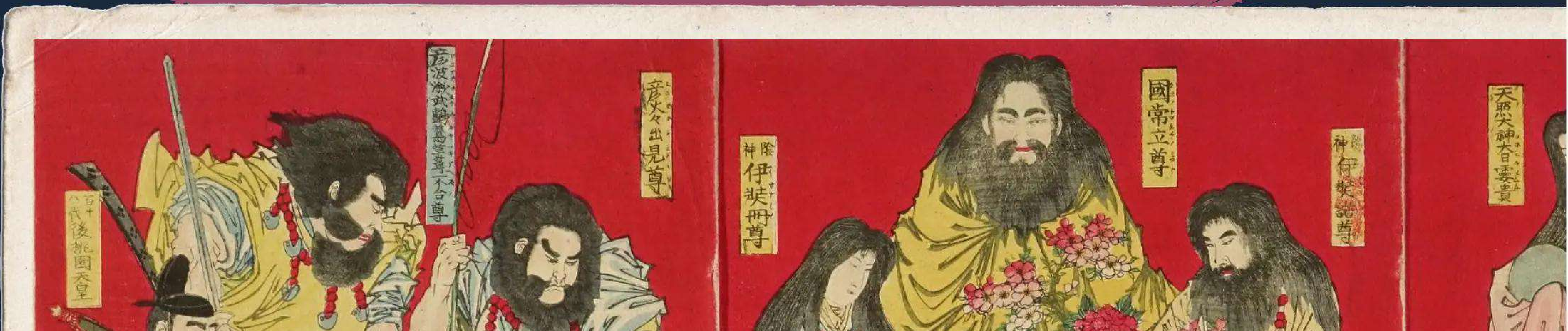
Aokigahara is over 30 square kilometres of untouched woodland situated at the base of Mount Fuji. Nicknamed 'The Suicide Forest' due to the number of people who have tragically taken their own lives within its dense thickets, its bed of lava rock allegedly sends compasses haywire thanks to its magnetism and its porosity causes sound to be absorbed, resulting in an eerie stillness. Long associated with death, some say ubasute was practised in the forest, a folkloric Japanese tradition of carrying elderly relatives to a remote location and abandoning them, leaving them to die – something not thought to have been carried out in actuality. Regardless, it is said that the spirits, or yūrei (see page 64), of those left there remain forever trapped within Aokigahara.

The forest is actively patrolled in the hope of finding and dissuading those who have come there with the intention of ending their lives

THE EVOLUTION OF MODERN MYTHOLOGY

WITH THE INTRODUCTION OF STATE SHINTO AND A NATIONAL MYTHOLOGY CHANGING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE, JAPAN'S LEGENDS BEGAN THE MARCH TO THE FUTURE

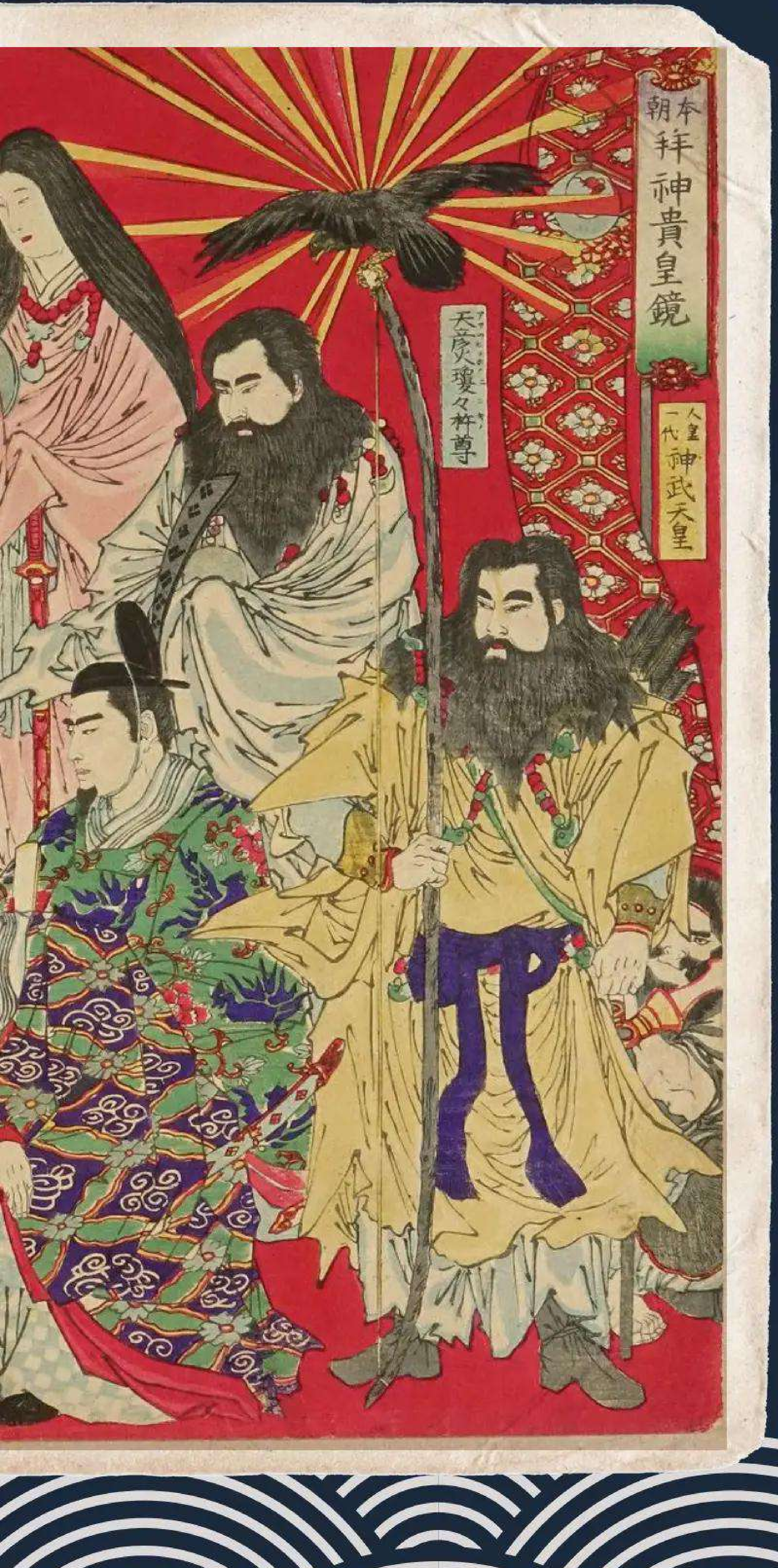
WRITTEN BY **CATHERINE CURZON**


國常立尊
伊奘冊尊
光格天皇
仁孝天皇
今上天皇
今上皇后
孝明天皇

From ancient Japan to the present, mythology has played an important role in the country's beliefs and culture. However, folklore is not unchanging nor set in stone and throughout Japanese history, it has evolved over millennia. From State Shinto's national mythology to the post-war myths of the 20th century and the incorporation of mythologies from other lands, Japanese folktales have not only been the tools of nationalism, but have also been influential across the globe.

STATE SHINTO

Japanese mythology experienced a significant shift during the Meiji era (1868-1912), which restored the Emperor Meiji to the throne after the Fall of Edo and was when the Japanese state introduced and imposed the concept of State Shinto. Though Shinto was not imposed on the people as a religion, scholars argued that Shinto supported the concept that an emperor was a divine being and that this belief in particular was not a matter of faith, but fact. In an effort to enshrine this supposed fact in Japanese matters of state as well as religion, the Shinto ideology of an emperor's divinity was made an element of state bureaucracy. The state would control shrine finances and oversee the training of priests, as well as defining shrines as patriotic rather than religious sites. If priests continued to practice traditional Shinto rather than this new, government-led version, they faced severe punishment, and more than 80,000 shrines eventually closed or merged. It was this state adoption of Shinto that led the USA to term it 'State Shinto', a concept that was ultimately banned in 1945 when the Shinto Directive established it as a religion, banning its ideological use.


本朝拝神貴皇鏡
天孫瓊々杵尊
人皇一代神武天皇

THE DIVINE EMPEROR

The Meiji restoration not only re-established the emperor as the single dominant force in Japan, but also sought to establish Shinto as it had been approximately a thousand years earlier, before centuries of evolution had seen it entwined with Buddhist belief. In the new State Shinto, Shinto and Buddhism were forcibly separated and in 1871, the newly-established Office of Shinto Worship was one of the most powerful in the land. Everything that came from this office was dedicated to emphasising the divinity of the emperor and though religious tolerance was observed, when it came to matters of bureaucracy, the new versions of Shinto was the only system.

During the Meiji era, ideological Shinto pervaded Japanese life. A family tree of the imperial family traced the lineage back to the very first emperor who, according to the new national mythology, was a direct descendent of the sun goddess, Amaterasu. Under State Shinto, a person no longer worshipped these gods, but rather the emperor himself. For those who observed the Shinto religion, however, the emperor had never been central to their faith or practice. But because the state had control of the training of priests, it was able to ensure that the new State Shinto could reshape what the religion meant and how it would be employed.

The divinity of the emperor was taught as a historical fact in schools, often by priests who would take their pupils to visit shrines that were controlled by the state's new Bureau of Shrines, which was kept tellingly separate from the Bureau of Religions. State Shinto's places of worship were not regarded as religious buildings like the corresponding Buddhist temples and Christian churches, but as non-religious locations. Shrines that conformed to the new normal of the Meiji state received financial support from the government, meaning that those that didn't would eventually be forced to close. Government-backed shrines were assigned propagandised meanings, including a number dedicated to soldiers who had died for the country. These shrines ignored local beliefs entirely, but there was little that could be done to protest.

ABOVE During and after the reign of Emperor Meiji, Shinto and the machinery of state became intrinsically and officially linked for decades

LEFT State Shinto re-established the divine link between the imperial family and the gods. It was regarded as a matter of fact, not conjecture

NATIONALISM

As a tool of nationalism, the imposition of State Shinto proved invaluable to the repositioning of the emperor in the minds of his subjects. Shinto was no longer a religion as such, but a matter of fact that could not be avoided. Religious rituals no longer required faith, but were presented instead as traditional cultural practices that all subjects could – and should – engage in, regardless of their faith;

"THE DIVINITY OF THE EMPEROR WAS TAUGHT AS FACT IN SCHOOLS" indeed, religious rituals that served no state or bureaucratic function were ultimately and severely restricted. Under new distinctions, rituals became a matter for the state, whereas doctrines were for individuals and families only. State Shinto thereby became a duty, whereas religious Shinto was a choice. Everything was ultimately in the service of the emperor's divinity.

The aforementioned shrines, believed to be occupied by the kami (spirits) of the dead who were honoured by them, served not only as a symbol of Japanese sacrifice, but of its power. Similar structures were constructed in Japanese-occupied lands, including 400 in Korea, whose residents were compelled by law to worship them and the kami who resided there. Once again, however, the act of worship was not an act of religion, but of patriotism. By 1937, more than half a million shrines had been set up in the households of occupied Taiwan, with other shrines being established all across occupied territory both before and during World War II.

However, State Shinto did not last.

POST-WAR

On 1 January 1946, following Japan's wartime defeat, Emperor Hirohito issued a statement in which he announced that he was not a divine being. The US issued the Shinto Directive and banned State Shinto, though it allowed ceremonies that honoured the emperor, viewing this as a matter of religious freedom. The Imperial House still performs Shinto ceremonies, though citizens are no longer obligated to take part and they are not funded by the state.

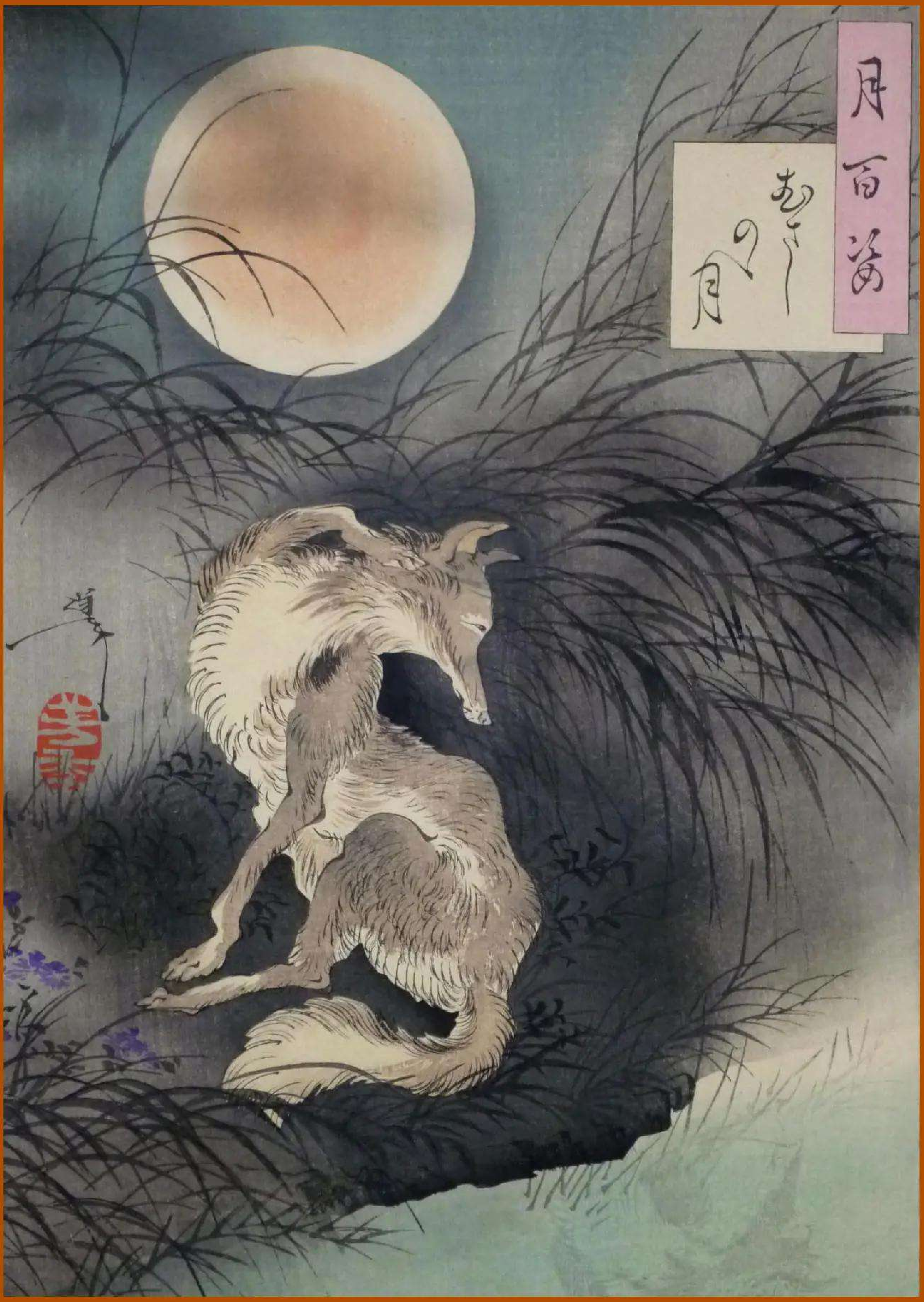
In the aftermath of the war, the network of shrines dedicated to soldiers who had died in battle took on a sinister new meaning

The kami of Japan's fallen reside at the Yasukuni Shrine. The site became controversial in the 1970s and remains so today

OPERATION FANTASIA

A FAILED AMERICAN INITIATIVE AIMED TO USE JAPANESE FOLKLORE AS A WEAPON OF WAR

In 1943, American intelligence operatives conceived of Operation Fantasia, a plan to send hundreds of kitsune (fox spirits), traditionally an omen of ill fortune, to Japan in the hope that it would crush morale. Suggestions for how to create the kitsune ranged from fox-shaped balloons to the release of genuine wild foxes that had been sprayed with luminous paint throughout Japanese villages. Though a crowd of painted foxes terrified the people of Washington DC during a test run, the problem of getting the foxes into Japan proved insurmountable and Operation Fantasia was quietly retired.

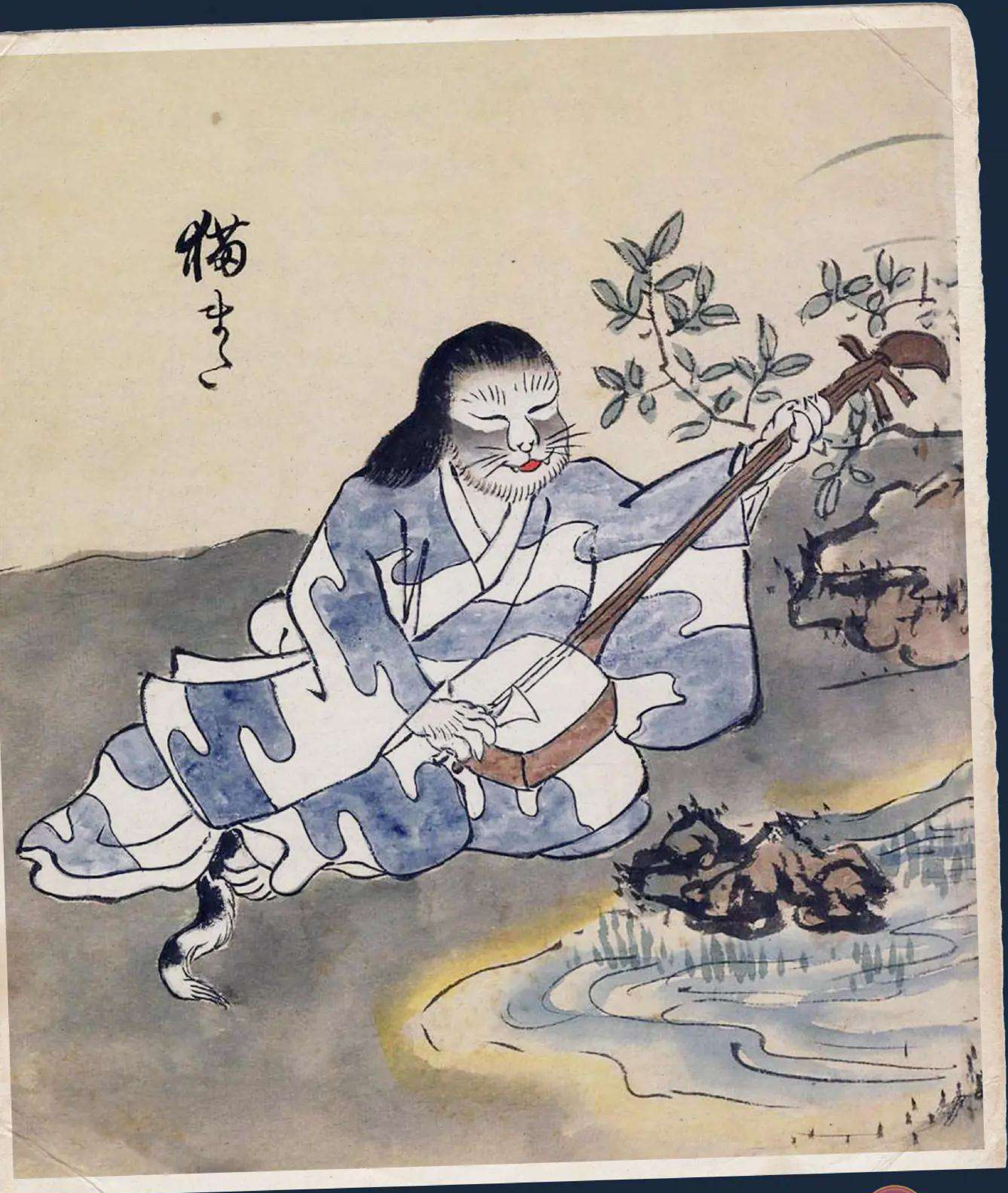


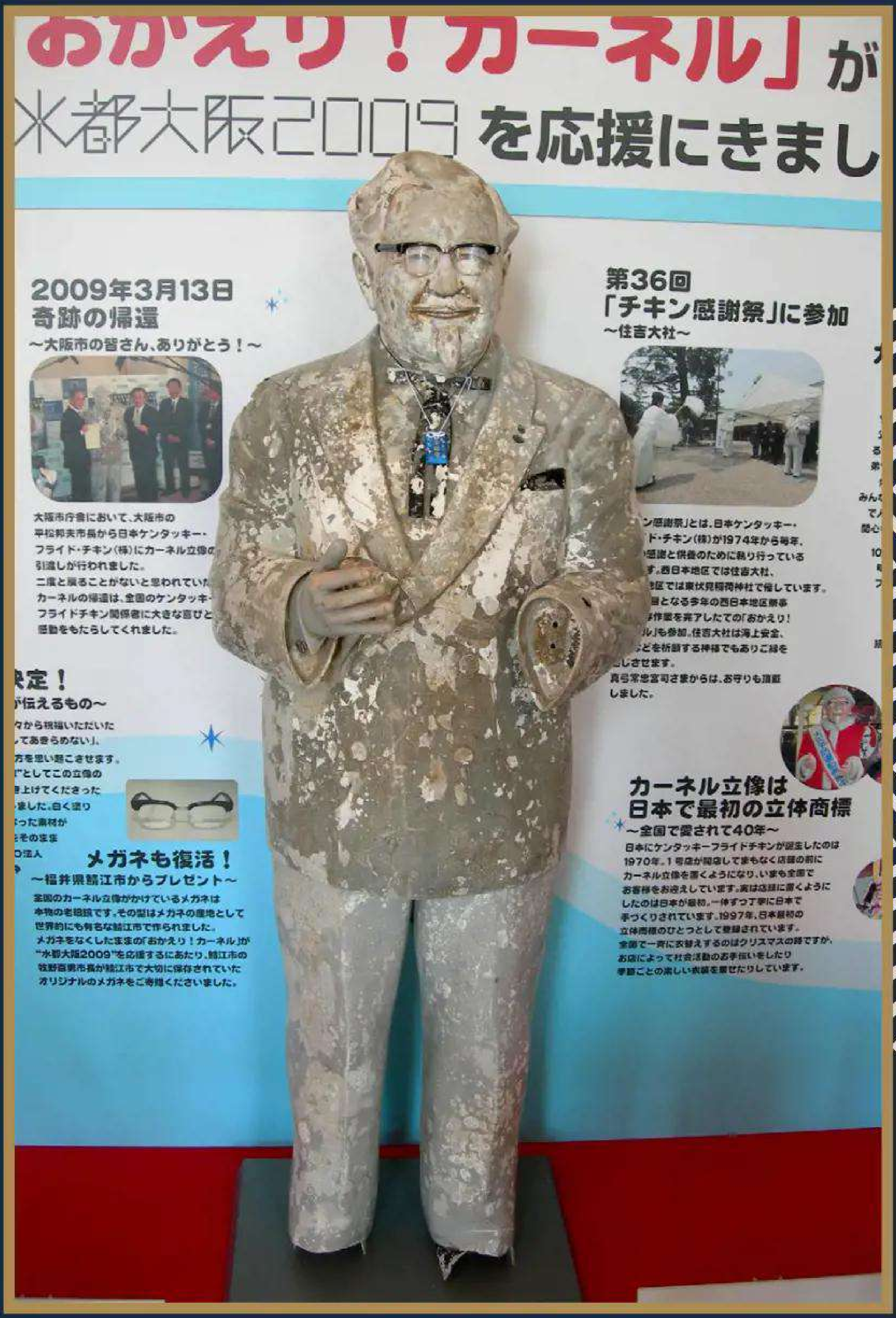
A scheme by American intelligence to terrorise the Japanese with spray-painted foxes unsurprisingly ended in failure for some because of the kami residing at the sites. Chief among the problematic shrines is the Yasukuni Shrine, which was built in 1869 and reserved only for the fallen of very specific conflicts. In 1978, a controversial and secret initiative saw the dedication of the shrine not only to soldiers who had fallen, but the kami of several war criminals. The revelation of this act led to an international outcry and many in Japan protested; it is telling that no emperor has visited the shrine since 1978 and that, when government officials do so, they are the subject of fierce criticism.

THE INFLUENCE OF WAR

Ever since Japan made contact with the West, both Western stories and faiths have established themselves the country, though Japanese folklore already enjoyed an impressive cast of characters long before it encountered this influence. However, following World War II, Japan's contact with the West was greater than ever before and this, along with its experiences during the conflict, changed the face of Japanese legend once more.

Japan's globally popular leading man, Godzilla, was inspired by the atomic bomb attacks on Nagasaki and Hiroshima. He became a superstar





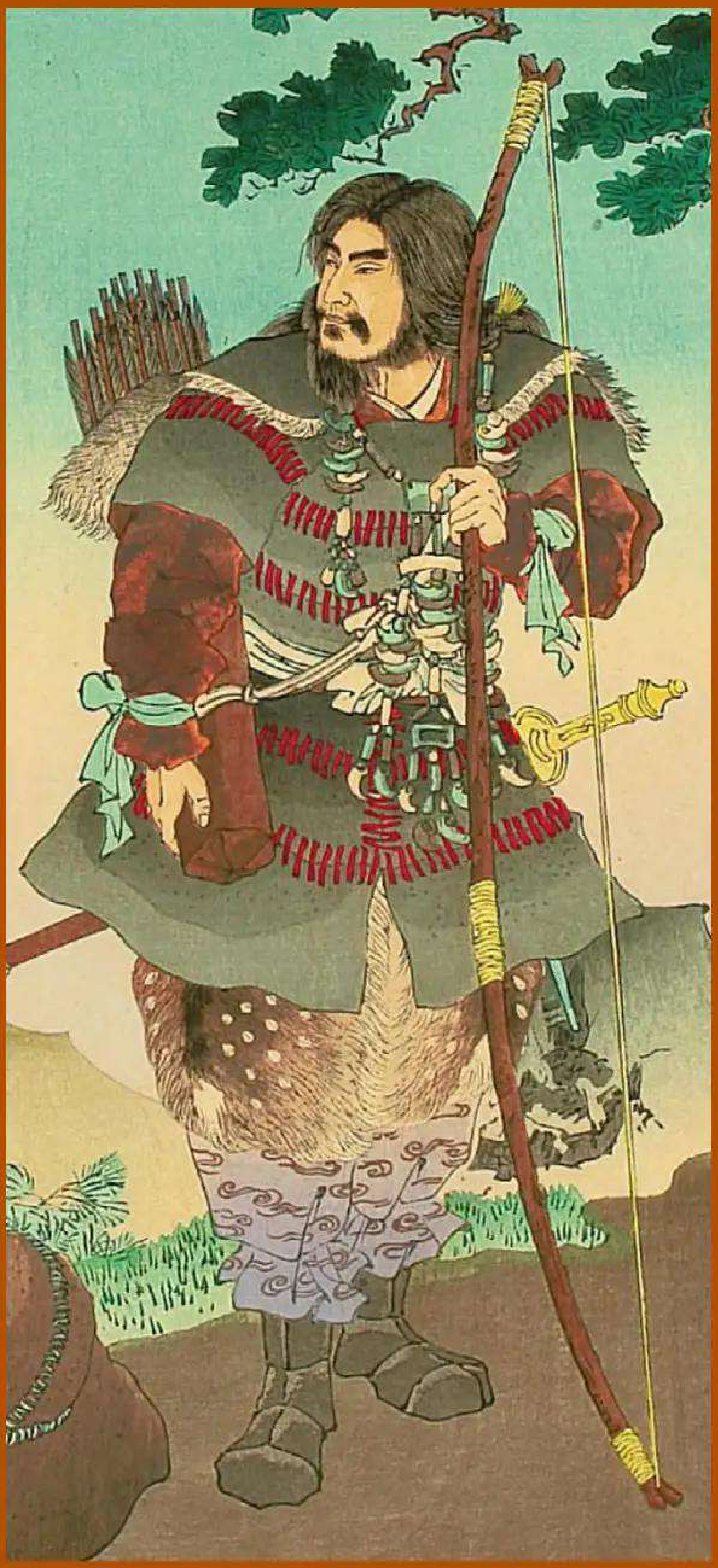
LEFT The ever-popular legendary Nekomata, Japan's feline yōkai, have become the inspiration for innumerable cartoons, toys, figurines and more all over the world

ABOVE When a statue of Colonel Sanders was thrown into a river by baseball fans, their team's subsequent poor form was attributed to a curse by the statue

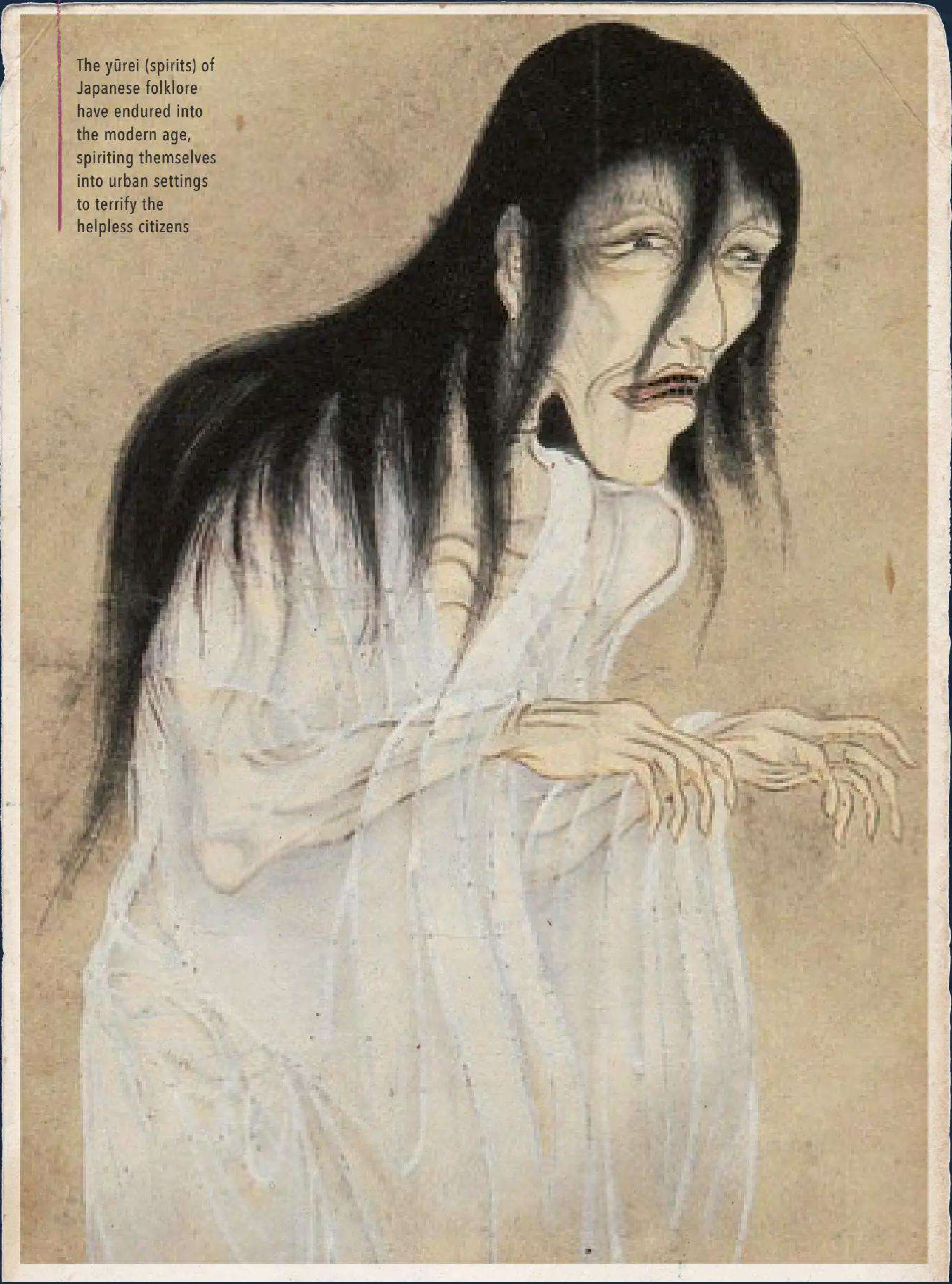
THE DIVINE EMPEROR

STATE SHINTO RE-ESTABLISHED THE EMPEROR AS A DIVINE BEING, BUT WHERE DID THIS BELIEF BEGIN?

Though he exists only as a figure of legend, Emperor Jimmu is believed to have been the first emperor of Japan. In the carefully constructed mythology that established the divine credentials of the imperial family, Jimmu is a direct descendant of the sun goddess, Amaterasu, who sent her grandson to Japan. There he married and raised three sons, one of whom wed the daughter of ocean dragon god Ryūjin, who bore him a son named Ugayafukiaezu. Ugayafukiaezu eventually married his aunt, goddess Tamayori-hime. Together the couple had four sons, one of whom became Emperor Jimmu.



Emperor Jimmu was the first emperor of Japan; through him, the imperial family traced its lineage to the divine



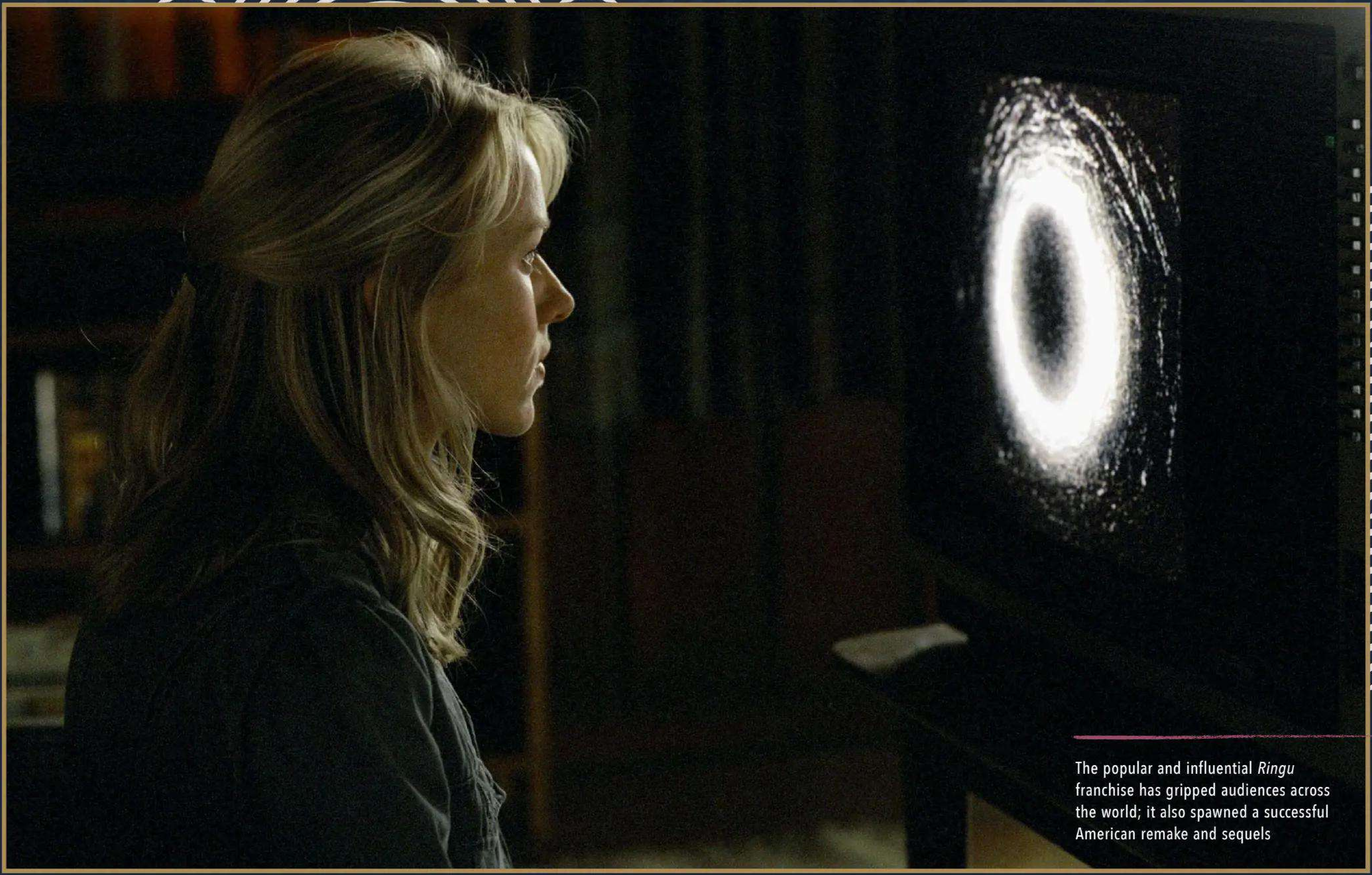
The yūrei (spirits) of Japanese folklore have endured into the modern age, spiriting themselves into urban settings to terrify the helpless citizens

Godzilla, one of Japan's most globally recognised superstars, owes his existence to the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombings. Movie producer, Tomoyuki Tanaka, read of an incident in which a crew of Japanese fishermen strayed too close to the US atom bomb testing grounds of the Bikini Atoll, leaving the entire crew irradiated. He was inspired to create an irradiated giant lizard who seeks revenge on humankind for the damage done to the homeland and the result was a franchise that endures to this day.

URBAN MYTHOLOGIES

Despite the vigorous efforts of the state, Japanese mythology has always taken and built on the folklore of neighbouring lands. The Japanese dragon for instance, owes much to its Chinese counterpart, and Buddhism, which originated in ancient India, became intrinsically linked with Shinto, which is something that State Shinto was intended to end once and for all. Japan's monkey folklore was enormously influenced by both Chinese and Indian works, and many Indian folk tales have been redrawn and absorbed into Japanese legend.

In keeping with much of the rest of the ever-more connected globe, the new myths found in Japan are increasingly urban. Japanese urban legends frequently involve evil paranormal entities, many of which have



The popular and influential *Ringu* franchise has gripped audiences across the world; it also spawned a successful American remake and sequels

> "JAPANESE CULTURE HAS CAPTURED THE IMAGINATION OF THE WORLD"

their roots in traditional Japanese folklore or yūrei (ghosts). Frequently these ancient spirits have found new victims in the modern age, where people have simply forgotten them and the warning tales that their ancestors would have shared. They often use technology as part of the tale, whether it's the cursed video tape of the *Ringu* franchise – itself inspired by ancient tales – or haunted railway lines, killer Kleenex commercials or even a cursed statue of Colonel Sanders.

There are even new stories, such as the Curse of the Red Room, that couldn't exist at all without the internet, which seems as far from folklore as you can imagine. But perhaps that's where these new monsters get their power: in the modern age of reason, the unsuspecting victims of this unknowable, ancient menace are utterly helpless…

It is these unsuspecting victims who become the new subjects of cautionary, modern folklore, passed from friend to friend and ultimately across the world via the internet. They become the legends that will frighten a whole new generation, driving Japanese mythology ever onwards.

A GLOBAL MYTHOLOGY

Today, Japanese culture has captured the imagination of the whole world. Mythical creatures such as tengu, kitsune (fox spirits) and, of course, Nekomata (cat spirits) take starring roles in manga, literature and other media. Their forms and names are instantly recognisable to billions of people across the world, many of whom may not even know that their favourite character or story actually originated in Japan.

Curiously, it seems that, as we become ever more technologically advanced, the grip of folklore and mythology has grown stronger and more attractive than ever. State Shinto may not have endured, but the ancient creatures of Japanese myth certainly have. In the modern era they are still as present as ever, and their reach is global.

After the defeat of Japan, Emperor Hirohito issued a statement that declared the imperial family were humans, rather than gods

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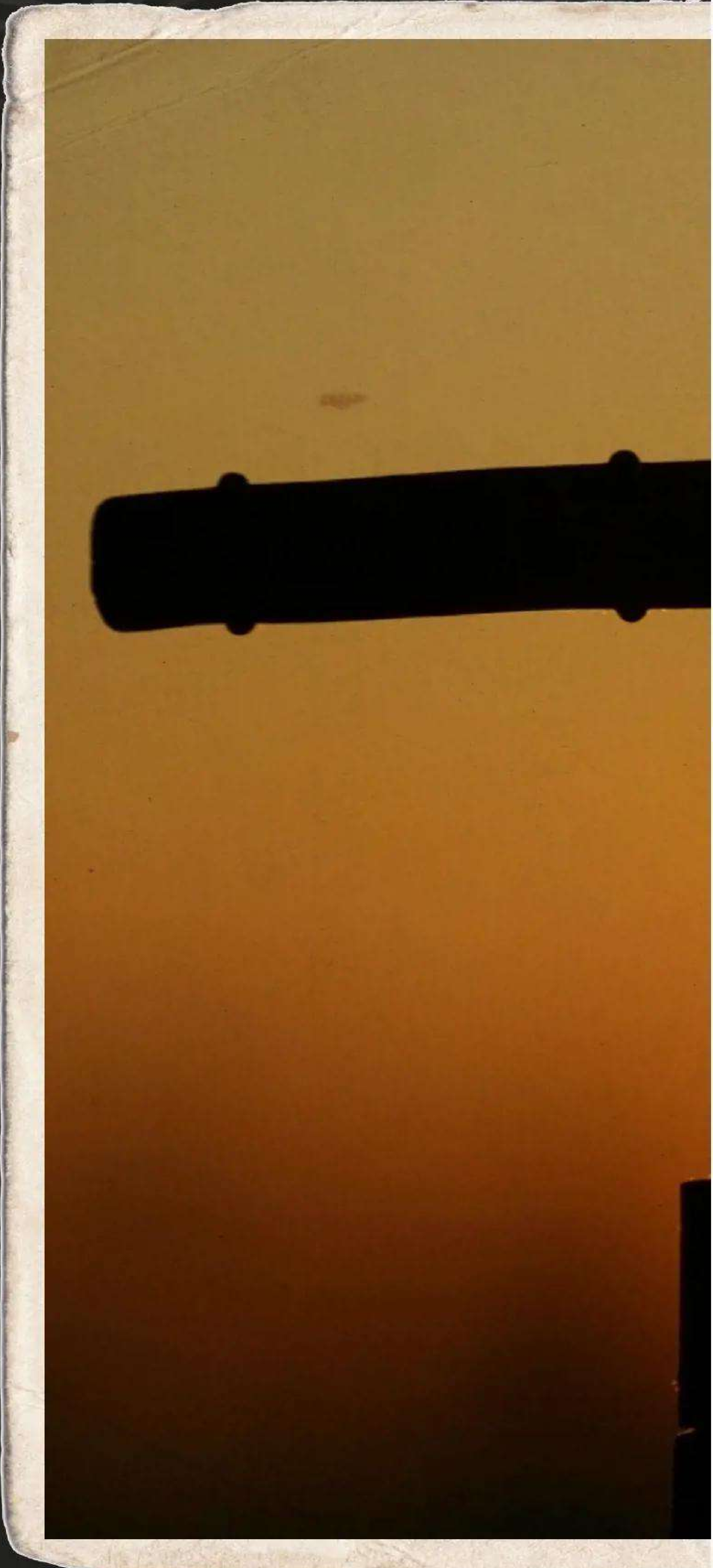
SHAPED BY THE SAMURAI



JAPAN'S SAMURAI WARRIORS BECAME LEGENDARY FIGURES IN THEIR OWN RIGHT AND HAVE INFLUENCED FICTIONAL NARRATIVES AND MYTHOLOGIES UP TO THE PRESENT DAY

WRITTEN BY **PHILIP S KAY**

Picture the scene: a cold, misty morning; a dark, silent forest; the sun slowly creeping up over a hidden horizon – its first rays struggling to pierce the isolated pockets of frozen vapour that have gathered between the canes of ancient bamboo overnight. From somewhere far away, you hear a low rumbling that gets louder and louder. As it approaches your position, you make out the sound of a hundred galloping hooves, and before you can react, they are upon you – a fearsome group of horse-mounted warriors clad in full battle armour bursts out from behind the treeline, their terrifying masks giving them the appearance of hideous creatures from some other world. They are samurai, and they know how to make an impression.

The scene described here is similar to a dramatic set piece that features in Edward Zwick's 2003 film, *The Last Samurai*, one of many creative endeavours that have been influenced by the mystique of Japan's elite warriors of old. Such a sight must have been chilling to behold in reality. The mythos that surrounds the samurai has grown since they graced the world, contributing to a legacy that now spans centuries. Accounts of their formidable exploits and unrivalled discipline have bestowed a legendary status upon them that has cut a long swathe through Japanese history and society. It has impacted folklore, traditional arts and modern media. Their reach has also transcended cultural boundaries, inspiring books, TV shows and movies, including the world's most iconic sci-fi saga.

THE WAY OF THE WARRIOR

What is it about the samurai that has created such long-lasting appeal to so many people? To identify the factors that separate them from the legions of other militaristic personages strewn across the battlefield of history, you need to look at their origins and lifestyle.

The rise of the samurai can be traced back to their beginnings as soldiers and protectors who served Japan's provincial landowners in the Heian period (794-1185). They developed into a specialised aristocratic military caste with a sophisticated ethical system and moral code that later became known as 'bushido', or 'the way of the warrior'. It is bushido that defined the behaviour of the samurai, and its practice that elevated them beyond the limits of what seems possible for most humans – into a realm reserved for heroes with extraordinary powers and capabilities.

Bushido encompassed a wide range of virtues that samurai tried to live in accordance with. Many of these admirable qualities would go on to permeate society and still constitute the core characteristics of modern Japanese culture and thought. Bushido's precepts of duty-bound honour and martial spirit encouraged fierce loyalty to a person's feudal lord and total dedication to a cause; it fostered a strong perfectionist disposition and required those who followed its path to cultivate incredible courage, composure and self-control. The tenacious and stoic samurai warriors were famed for their ability to take decisive action at the right time, regardless of the harm it might cause to themselves.

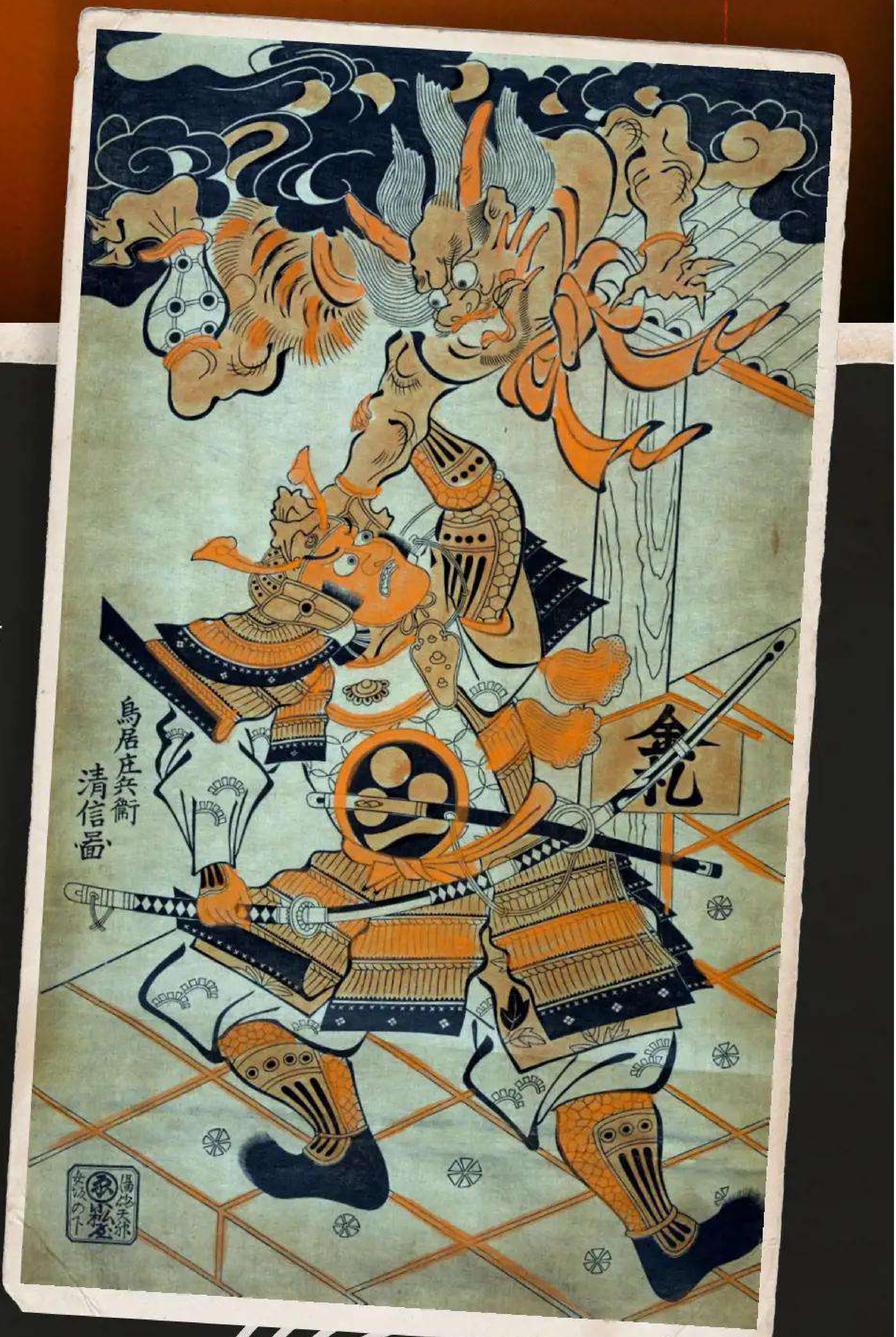
"IT IS BUSHIDO THAT DEFINED THE BEHAVIOUR OF THE SAMURAI"

FROM HISTORY TO LEGEND

Despite their superhuman attributes and reputation, the samurai were real people. Many of them were important figures who

The elegant swords of Japanese warriors were deadly weapons of exquisite craftsmanship. They were also believed to possess spiritual qualities

This woodcut by Utagawa Toyokuni shows that samurai warriors became mythical figures who not only battled human opponents but also demons and other supernatural entities



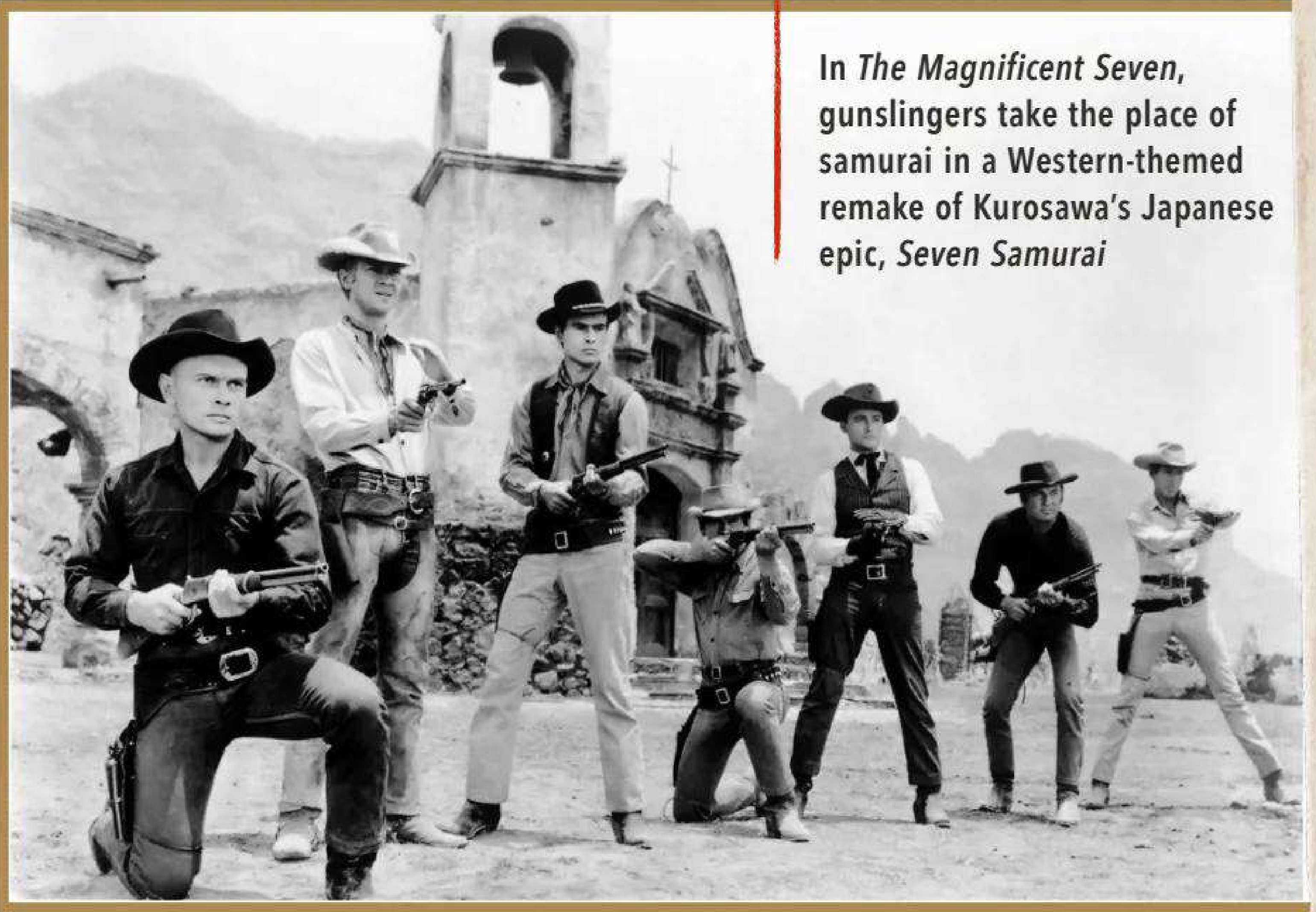
played pivotal roles in shaping Japan's history, and as such, there are a multitude of stories that tell of their feats and adventures. Although these tales are often rooted in actual events, some were embellished and others took on fantastical elements, helping their protagonists transition to the world of myth and folklore.

One notorious personality is Taira no Masakado, a rebellious 10th-century samurai with royal blood who, in an audacious move, declared himself the new emperor. His brave but risky offensive faced resistance, and he was eventually hunted down and killed. His severed head was taken to Kyoto and put on display – a gruesome warning to all those who might oppose the powers that be. Sometime later, reports of strange goings-on emerged: the disembodied head had opened its eyes; it had wailed in the night as it searched for its missing torso. Finally, it had flown away. This supernatural yarn continued to gain momentum over the years until Taira no Masakado became known as one of Japan's most prominent onryo (vengeful spirits). Even now, people make sure to avoid disrespecting his grave for fear of inciting his wrath.

The exciting, heroic and sometimes strange tales of the samurai made popular subject matter for military epics, such as the *Heike Monogatari*. Their deeds were reenacted in kabuki performances, and traditional woodblock print artists portrayed them battling evil folklore-borne demons and other amorphous entities in their works. Even the warriors' swords, infused with the magical properties of Shinto spirits, came to possess their own mythic narratives. Once mere mortals, the samurai had transformed into legends.

MODERN-DAY IMPACT

Perhaps the most pervasive of all samurai stories is the tragic tale of the 47 ronin. Ronin were wandering samurai who no longer served



In *The Magnificent Seven*, gunslingers take the place of samurai in a Western-themed remake of Kurosawa's Japanese epic, *Seven Samurai*

Samurai sometimes wore armour that was flexible yet still offered protection from enemies' arrows. Their intimidating masks and helmets had intricate designs

a feudal lord. Their reasons for becoming masterless varied, but in the case of these warriors, it was the death of their lord. (He was ordered to kill himself in 1701.) Two years later, in defence of their master's honour, 47 of his loyal retainers avenged him. They assaulted the residence of the man they held responsible and assassinated him. After completing their task, the ronin turned themselves in and committed ritual suicide.

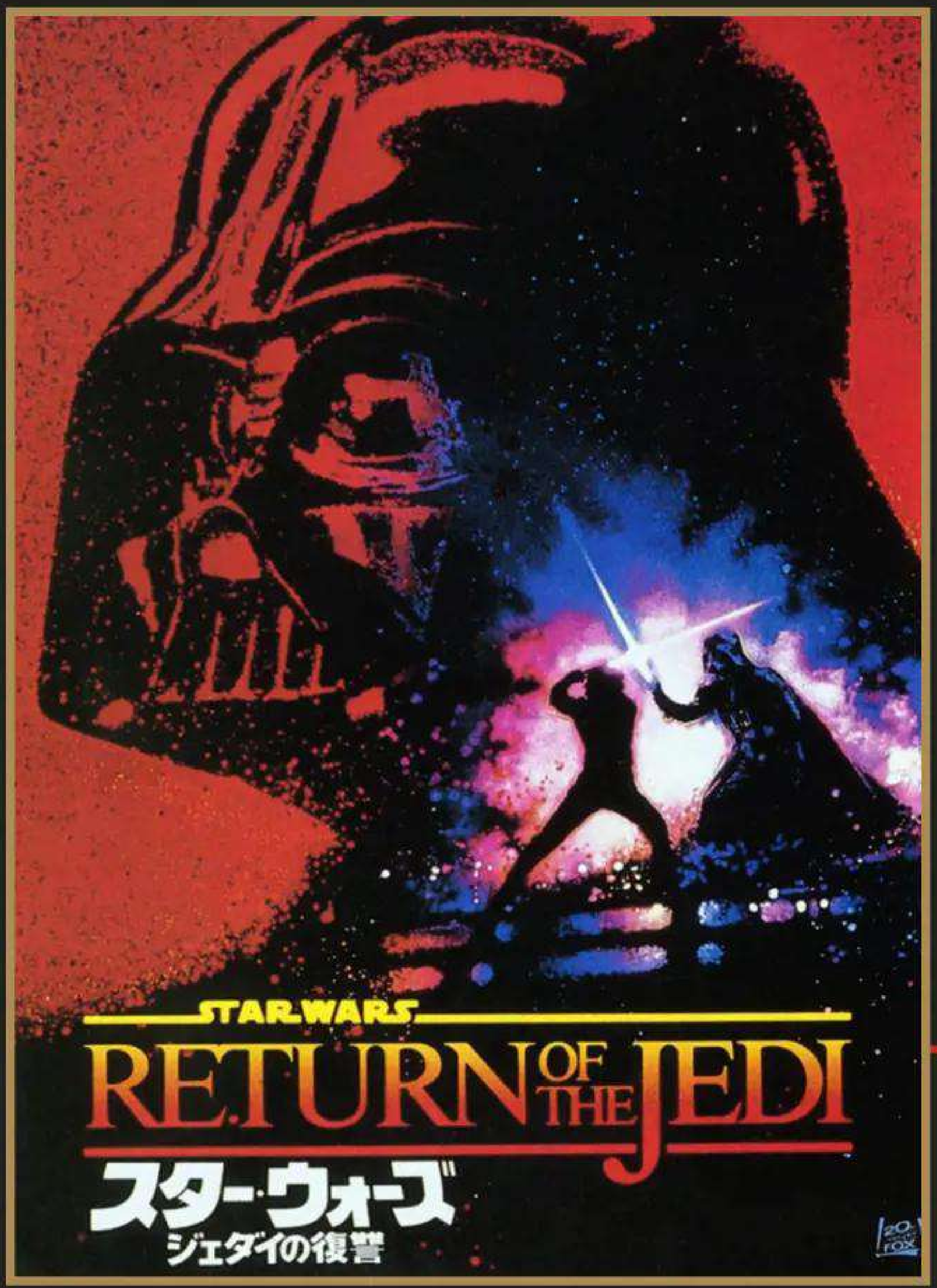
The incident captured people's hearts. It epitomises the best qualities of the noble warriors who would dutifully sacrifice themselves for what they believed in. The legendary story was retold in plays and later adapted for television and several films. Other movies told new, fictional tales that extolled the timeless virtues of the samurai. The most recognisable of these is Akira Kurosawa's 1954 cinematic masterpiece, *Seven Samurai*. The story of a brave band of ronin who come together to protect a village from plundering bandits was later reworked and released as the Western, *The Magnificent Seven*, highlighting the universal appeal of its themes.

The films of Kurosawa also played a significant role in the creation of *Star Wars*. George Lucas

Akira Kurosawa's classic *Seven Samurai* tells the story of a group of masterless samurai that team up to protect local villagers from thieving bandits

– an admirer of Kurosawa's work – incorporated several plot points, motifs and designs into his epic sci-fi series that pay tribute to the Japanese director's pictures. In fact, he cites *The Hidden Fortress* as being a key influence for his first *Star Wars* film adventure (*A New Hope*), and with their strict codes of honour and selfless demeanour, parallels between Japan's exalted warriors and Lucas's Jedi Knights are easy to see. Even the intimidating helmets of Darth Vader and his army of Imperial stormtroopers seem to be space-age versions of those of the samurai.

Although they might not have the same monumental impact on popular culture as *Star Wars*, tales of samurai courage and daring continue to find their way into modern media. Novels, manga, television, cinema and video games all celebrate the warriors' enduring legacy. No longer confined to Japanese history, the samurai have become part of world mythology – timeless heroes who could do what most of us are unable to. Their indomitable spirit and staggering ability to simultaneously push and deny themselves beyond ordinary human limits is what has made them into figures of myth and legend.


STAR WARS
RETURN OF THE JEDI
スター・ウォーズ
ジェダイの復讐

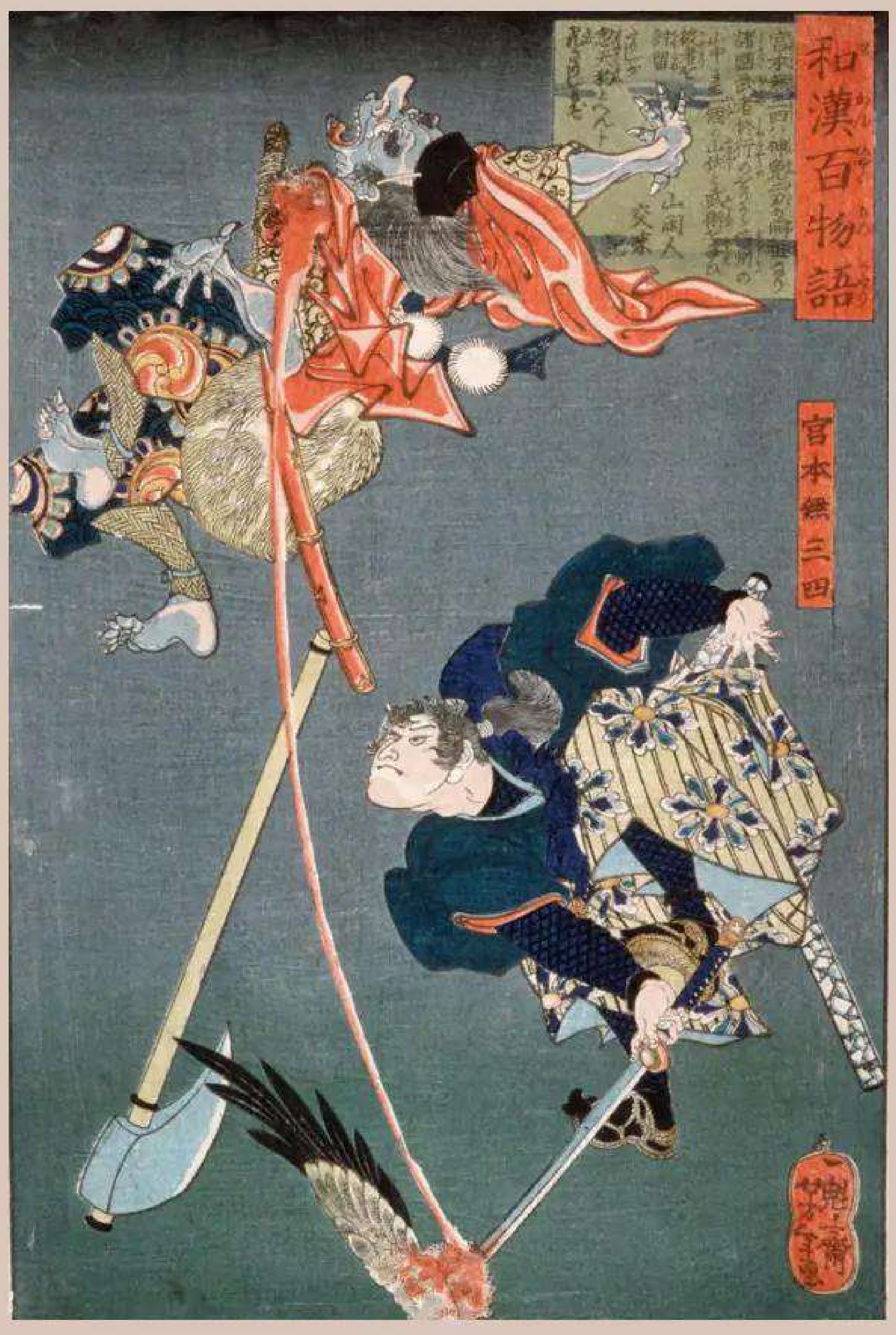
This Japanese poster for *Return of the Jedi* shows the influence that the samurai had on the design of Darth Vader

> "THE SAMURAI HAVE BECOME PART OF WORLD MYTHOLOGY"

MIYAMOTO MUSASHI

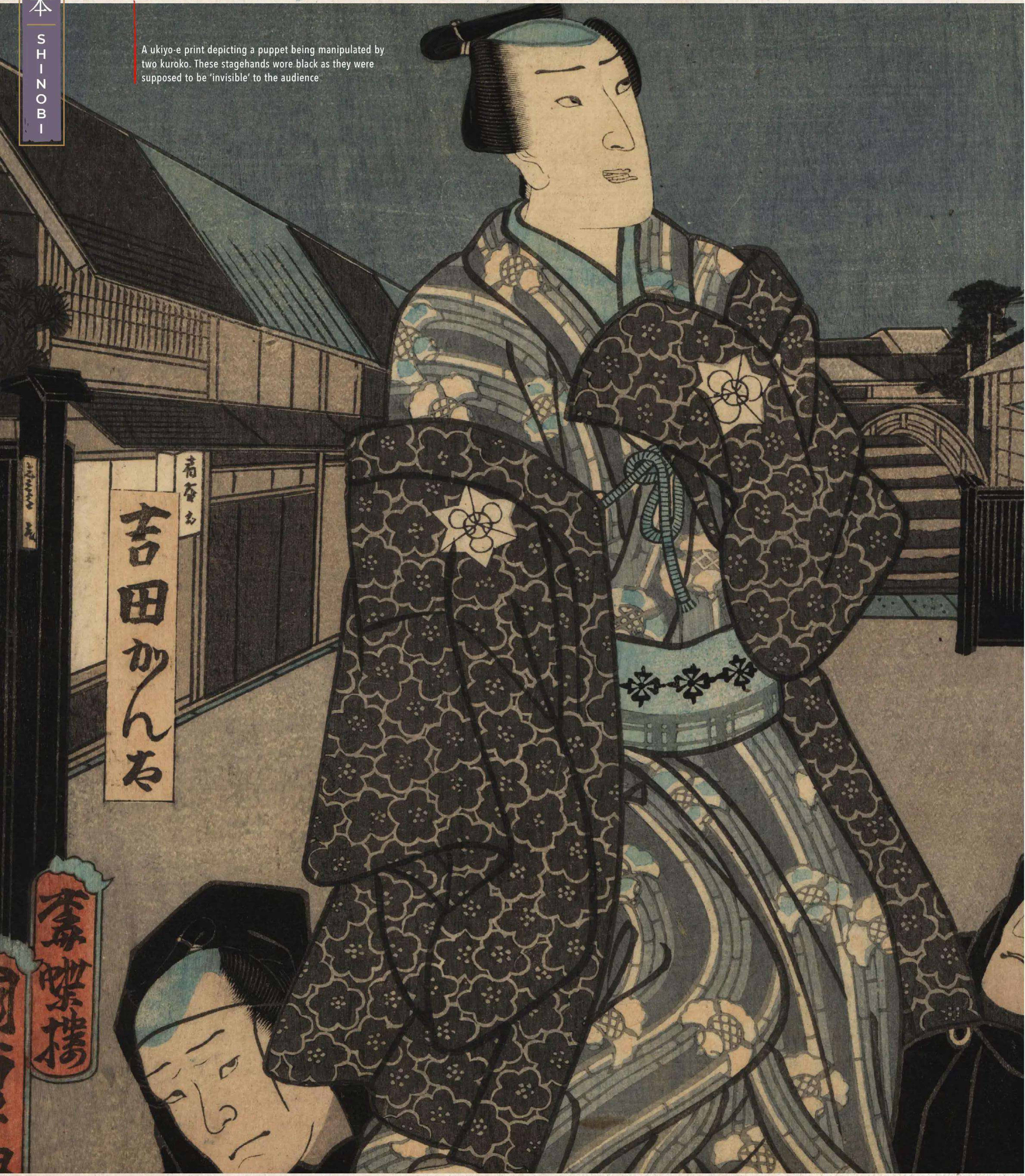
GET TO KNOW JAPAN'S MOST LEGENDARY SWORDSMAN

Samurai Miyamoto Musashi was born in 1584 and fought more than 60 duels during his lifetime. His tactical mastery and incredible martial skill ensured victory in all of them. Miyamoto developed his own two-sword fighting technique, but like many samurai, he also excelled in more peaceful pursuits. He was a talented artist and authored the famous strategy guide, *The Book of Five Rings*. As word of his real and imagined exploits spread, his legend grew until he became a warrior of such renown that he was venerated as a sword saint.

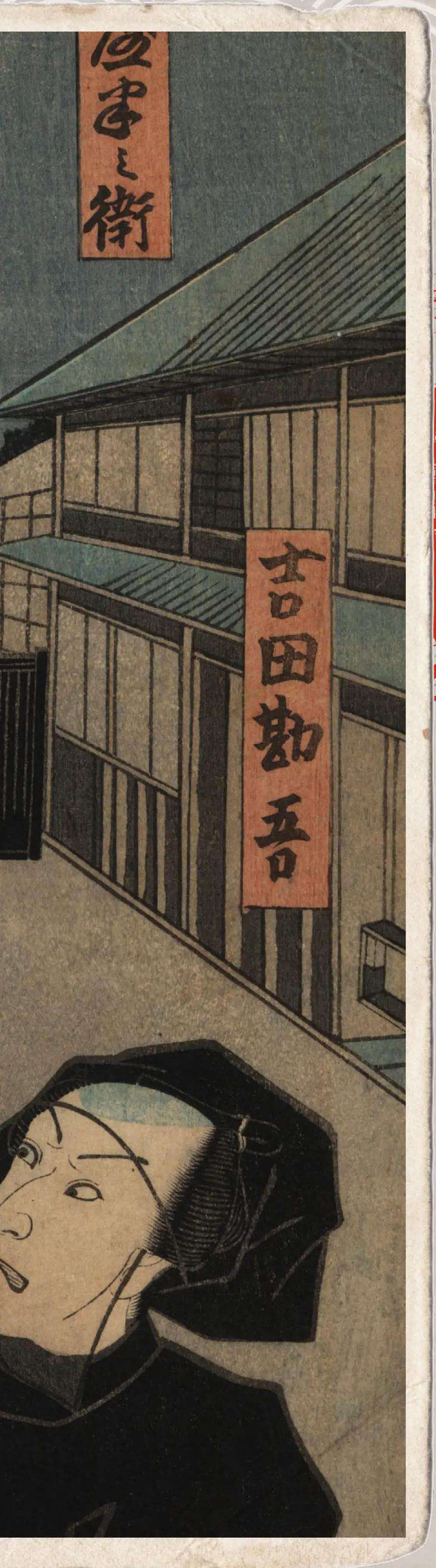


A 19th-century woodblock print by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi depicting legendary warrior Miyamoto Musashi using his katana to vanquish a hideous, mythical tengu

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy



A ukiyo-e print depicting a puppet being manipulated by two kuroko. These stagehands wore black as they were supposed to be 'invisible' to the audience



SHINOBI STAGEHANDS

HOW JAPANESE THEATRE CREATED THE MOVIE NINJA

WHO WERE THE JAPANESE NINJAS (AKA SHINOBI), AND HOW DOES THE REALITY DIFFER FROM THE FICTIONAL FOLKLORE ASSOCIATED WITH THEM?

WRITTEN BY **AIDEN DALBY**

Ninjas, or as they were known in Japan, 'shinobi', were masters of deception, infiltration, sabotage and fighting. Often hired by samurai, their goal was to spy on enemies by travelling into hostile environments and collecting information. They were also known for sabotaging enemy fortresses, usually by starting fires. The samurai could not perform these acts themselves as they were bound by bushido, but that didn't mean they couldn't hire others to do the job for them.

The ninja is an anomaly of Japanese culture. In a society notable for its emphasis on honour and order, the ninja is the antithesis. But rather than being despised, they have captured the imagination of not only Japan, but the West, probably more so than any other part of Japanese history. Over time, the ninja has become surrounded in myth and legend, but what caused this and is there any truth behind the folklore?

THE WAY OF THE NINJA

There is little historical documentation of ninjas, which isn't surprising given their secretive nature. This has led to many misconceptions about the warriors and over time the stories surrounding them have been romanticised. The first reference to 'shinobi' comes from the 8th century but the first record of these warriors being trained and employed wasn't until the Sengoku period in the 15th century. This time was tumultuous and it created demand for people willing to commit dubious acts. One of the best records we have is the *Bansenshukai*, a book dating back to 1676, that collected together

"OVER TIME, THE NINJA HAS BECOME SHROUDED IN MYTH AND LEGEND" information on military strategy, weapons, philosophy and more.

Like the samurai, shinobi were typically born into the profession and taught by masters of the craft. There is often a belief that because of the underhanded nature of the ninja, they came from the lower classes. But actually ninjas, like their samurai cohorts, were closer to the aristocrats. From a young age they would be trained in the art of stealth, spying and survival. Today this would be known as 'ninjutsu', but there is no evidence that this term was used at the time. A lot of the teachings of shinobi were derived from the 13th chapter of Sun Tzu's *Art of War*, which explained methods of espionage.

"THE NINJA IS OFTEN DEPICTED AS A TYPE OF ASSASSIN, HIRED TO KILL SOMEONE OF IMPORTANCE"

In modern culture, the ninja is often depicted as a type of assassin, hired to sneak into somewhere and kill someone of importance. As with a lot of the misinformation around shinobi, this is most likely due to their depiction in film. In reality, shinobi would rarely kill and there are historical examples of them saving lives. One of the most famous ninjas, Hattori Hanzo, got his fame for saving the life of Japan's first shogun, Tokugawa Ieyasu, in 1582 when he smuggled him out of enemy territory to safety.

SEE WITHOUT BEING SEEN

Although assassinations were conducted by these warriors, it was incredibly rare. Shinobi were used more often to spy or sabotage enemies. Perhaps the most common misconception about ninjas is in regards to the clothes they would wear. They are typically depicted in an all-black outfit and Hollywood movies such as the James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*, helped to perpetuate this myth. But there is no historical evidence of these clothes being worn. The idea that ninjas wore black could have come from Japanese theatre. The stagehands, or 'kuroko' as they were known, would dress head to toe in black to imply invisibility as they moved props and scenery across the stage. This evolved into the kuroko's outfits being worn to represent the ninja moving stealthily around. This was depicted in the ukiyo-e prints showing the theatre performance and without historical context, these became misinterpreted. In reality, ninjas would typically be dressed as regular citizens to avoid drawing attention to themselves. Common disguises included merchants, monks, entertainers and samurai, as these would wear baggy clothing – perfect for concealing weapons.

THE ARSENAL OF THE NINJA

Shinobi had a plethora of tools at their disposal, the choice of which would depend on the mission. However, the function of the tools was not for offensive moves, but

The 1967 James Bond film, *You Only Live Twice*, introduced the West to shinobi and depicted them dressed head to toe in dark clothing

ABOVE Even today, ninjas are the subject of popular stories. *Naruto*, which has sold over 250 million copies worldwide, is a manga series following a young ninja

ABOVE RIGHT A ninja's arsenal was meant not for killing, but for infiltration, sabotage and if necessary, subduing someone. They were also meant to be easy to hide

for infiltration or distraction. The shuriken, a throwing star, is commonly seen in movies as a weapon meant for killing. This is another example of popular culture skewing reality, as these were most likely used to serve as a distraction (and could also be used for slashing). Ropes and grappling hooks were common for infiltration, and items such as chisels, hammers and picks could be used to help create holes in walls to use as footholds. The kunai, a pointed tool, was also used for this purpose, although it is typically depicted in modern media as a weapon.

When a weapon was needed, a katana would have been the item of choice, but again there is little evidence of this actually being used. The kusarigama was a sickle with a weighted chain and it had multiple uses, as the blade could cut ropes while the weighted chain could be thrown at an enemy's weapons and then pulled so the opponent was disarmed. A lot of the tools and weapons look similar to things a farmer might be seen wielding, which would make sense for a ninja hoping to blend in.

Not all the myths surrounding the ninja come from Western interpretations, though. In Japanese manga, ninjas were often illustrated riding kites like a glider in order to fly over into enemy territory. This is thought to originate from a story of an attack on Kanazawa Castle but the more likely case in this scenario was that kites were used to carry small containers holding burning coal. Once over a building, the coals were released, setting buildings ablaze.

THE KUNOICHI

WERE WOMEN EVER TRAINED AS SHINOBI?

Female ninjas were not unheard of, but it was incredibly rare

In the *Bansenshukai*, there is mention that women were used in the art of infiltration. Known as kunoichi, these female shinobi would act similarly to their male counterparts, gaining access to enemy locations, listening in on conversations and gathering knowledge. While it is commonly depicted in manga and film, this wasn't a common occurrence and kunoichi were only used in cases where it was hard to infiltrate using men.

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

FOR THE LOVE OF KAIJU

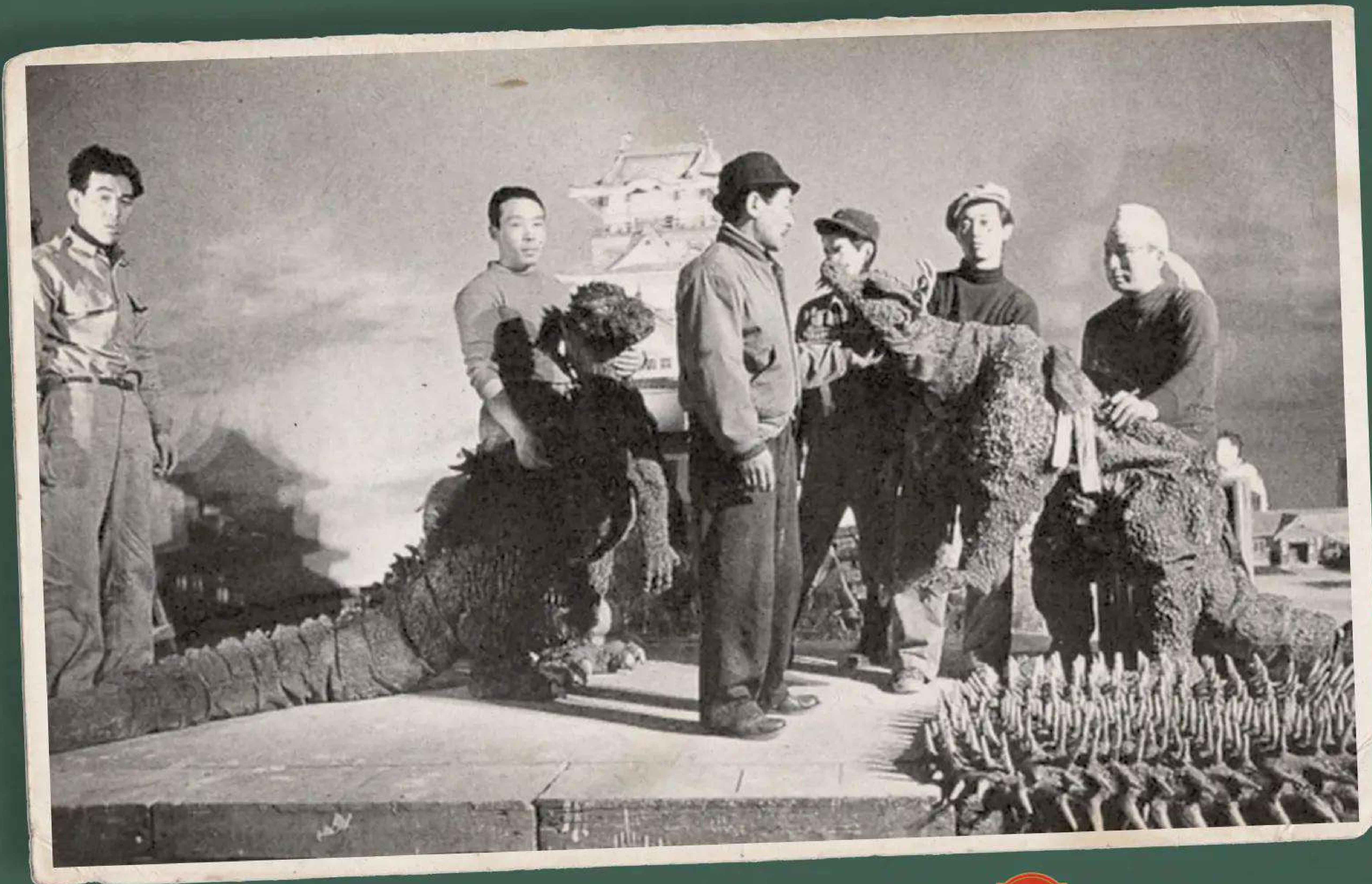
HOW JAPAN MADE MARAUDING MONSTERS TOPPLING TOKYO A CULTURAL MAINSTAY

WRITTEN BY **CALUM WADDELL**

As the only country to have experienced the hideous impact of the nuclear bomb, it is hardly surprising that Japan explored such trauma in its cinema – whether in the washed-out landscapes of new wave directors such as Yasujirō Ozu, or the more globally familiar images of 'kaiju' epics. For those unaware, the direct English translation of 'kaiju' is 'strange beast', although in simple (and frankly generic) terms the word is used as a reference to homegrown monster-movies – an entire cottage industry that began with director Ishirō Honda's *Godzilla*, from 1954. While many might only know the Japanese version of Godzilla (or 'Gojira', meaning 'giant lizard', as he is referred to at home) as a reference to colourful, but 'campy' jaunts featuring a man in a rubber suit, Honda's original outing is a far more serious and character-based affair. What might surprise first-time viewers is how much the film displays a traditional Japanese culture, protected for centuries through refusing foreign presence or trade, colliding with the challenges of a liberal modernity in the post-war years.

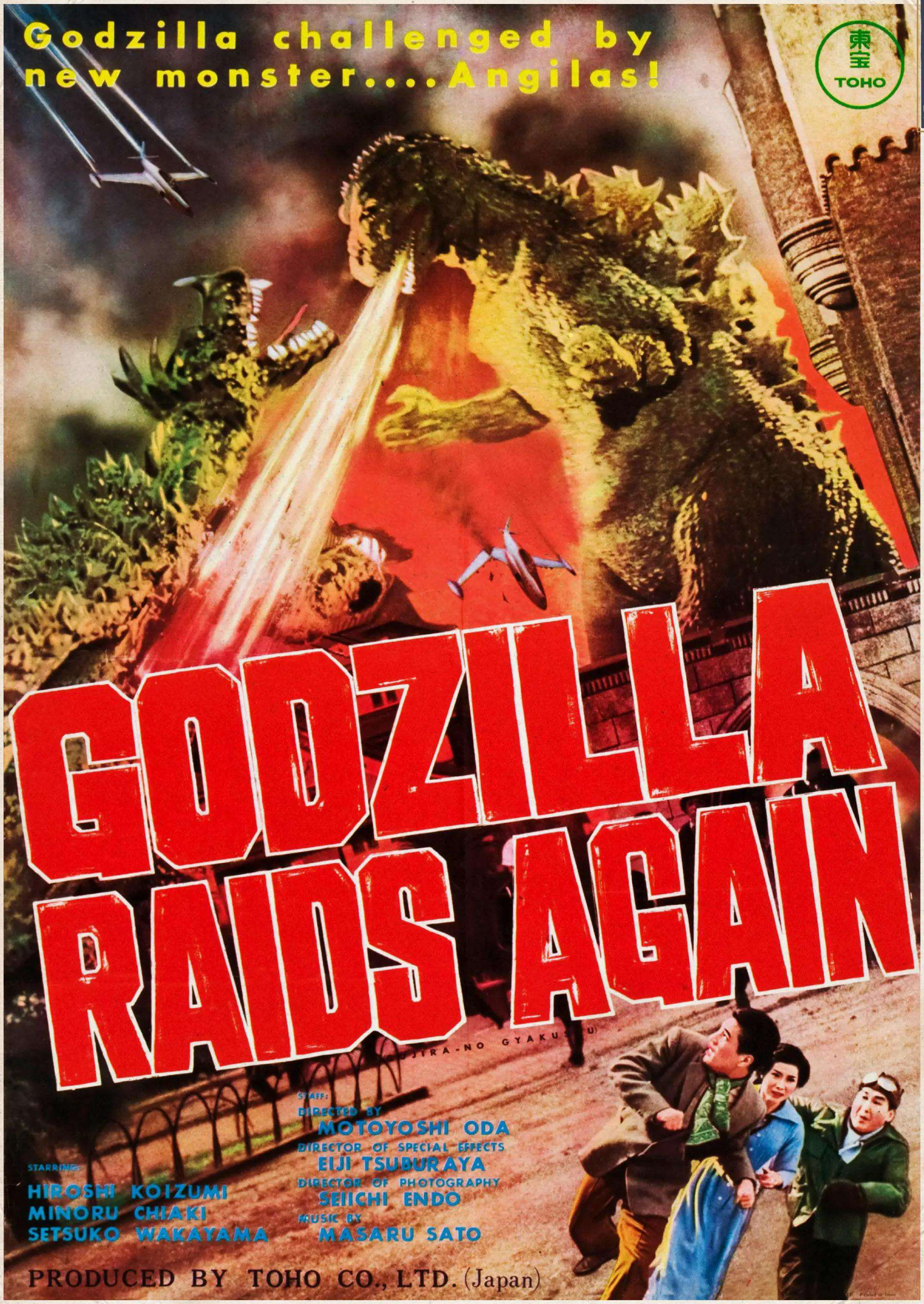
MORE THAN A MONSTER

Thus, as the nuclear-infused Godzilla rises from the depths of the sea (in an impressive costume designed by legendary effects geniuses Teizô Toshimitsu and Eiji Tsuburaya) and begins to trash small villages before he heads to Tokyo, the film takes a surprisingly delicate turn. Much of the focus is on a love triangle between a woman who feels pressured into marrying a 'genius' scientist, one of her father's closest work colleagues, despite being in love with someone else. Honda's film is as much about the push-and-pull of modern life, between familial expectation and individualism in the 'new' Japan, particularly as it relates to young, professional women. More than just a kaiju classic, the first Godzilla film also highlights how unprepared Japan is for another catastrophe – with Honda not shying away from critiquing the authoritarian leanings of the society that led the country into war just a decade prior, nor admiring the city-building that has emerged since.



LEFT Selected cast and crew of *Godzilla Raids Again* (1955), including director Motoyoshi Oda (middle), ponder some behind-the-scenes kaiju action

RIGHT *Godzilla Raids Again* was hurried into production and released just a year after the success of the original


Godzilla challenged by new monster....Angilas!
東宝
TOHO
GODZILLA
RAIDS AGAIN
JIRA-NO GYAKUS U
STARRING:
HIROSHI KOIZUMI
MINORU CHIAKI
SETSUKO WAKAYAMA
STAFF:
DIRECTED BY
MOTOYOSHI ODA
DIRECTOR OF SPECIAL EFFECTS
EIJI TSUBURAYA
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY
SEIICHI ENDO
MUSIC BY
MASARU SATO
PRODUCED BY TOHO CO., LTD. (Japan)

Ultimately, though, when the fire-breathing behemoth was given an American release in 1956, this monochrome monster movie classic was redubbed and reedited, introducing a new character – an award-winning journalist called Steve Martin (no kidding) played by Raymond Burr, and totally eliminating the entire love triangle from the narrative. The result is a curious concoction, stripping *Godzilla* of much of its cultural importance and references. Regardless, the result was a huge box office success, and the United States became one of the key markets for subsequent films – arguably part of the reason that the sequels become far more focused on creatures battling other creatures and colourful special effects, than the more intricate localised characters and situations detailed in Honda's original masterpiece.

MAKING A FRANCHISE

The 1954 *Godzilla* kicks-off what fans know as the Shōwa period (referring to the movies unleashed when Emperor Hirohito reigned over the country) and spawns 15 films – climaxing in *Terror of Mechagodzilla*, from 1975. As per the title, things had gone rather crazy in the two decades or so that separate these two totems. Part of the reason is that after *Godzilla*, and its more popcorn-friendly black-and-white sequel, *Godzilla Raids Again* – released a year later and helmed by Motoyoshi Oda – filmmakers seemed to decide that the real appeal was the men-in-the-monster-get-ups rather than any deep philosophising about environmental curses or characters caught between lovers. Thus, Honda's original vision was turned into such widescreen mayhem as the self-explanatory crossover *King Kong vs Godzilla* (1962), *Mothra vs Godzilla* (1964), which introduced one of the 'Big G's' most memorable opponents, the exceptional *Ghidorah, the Three Headed Monster* (1964), *Invasion of the Astro-Monster* (1965) and *Destroy All Monsters* (1968), all of which Honda returned to direct. The latter, largely played for sheer spectacle, actually anticipates, and possibly influenced, Steven Spielberg's *Jurassic Park* series, with its story of an entire other world occupied by Godzilla and his monstrous chums (who are now helping humans).

Meanwhile, Godzilla's main rival, Gamera – a ferocious giant turtle – first appeared in 1965, instigating a run of Shōwa films in his own right. Make no mistake, the original black-and-white entry, *Gamera, The Giant Monster*, directed by veteran filmmaker Noriaki Yuasa (who returned to make several of the sequels) is a classic in its own right. While not as instantly-iconic as Godzilla, what has given Gamera so much staying power (his last film was the more kiddie-orientated *Gamera the Brave*, in 2006, although rumours continue about a fresh reboot) is the character's ability to navigate changing Japanese politics and landscapes. For example, Yuasa's *Gamera: Super Monster* from 1980, is bold enough to reimagine Japan as a friendly intergalactic power that might be trusted to defend all humankind in the future. All wrapped-up in the guise of one of kaiju's most memorable monsters. Go figure.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF KAIJU

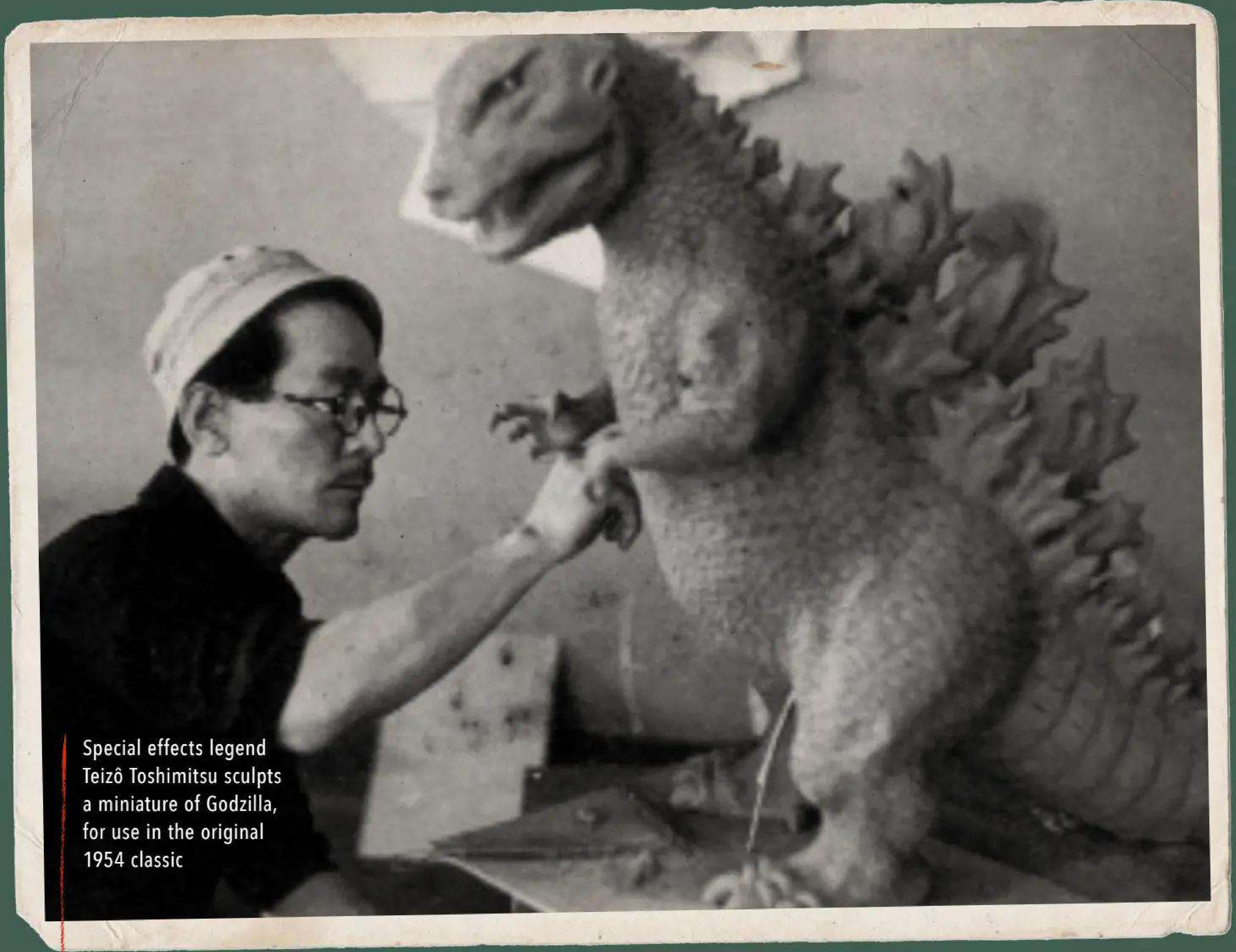
Nonetheless, it was the fifties and the sixties that documented the height of the kaiju phenomenon, it is even this period, and its truly surreal storylines, that director Guillermo del Toro pays homage to in his 2013 outing *Pacific Rim*. While a list of the must-see motion pictures from this time would be exhaustive, the curious viewer can generally not go wrong

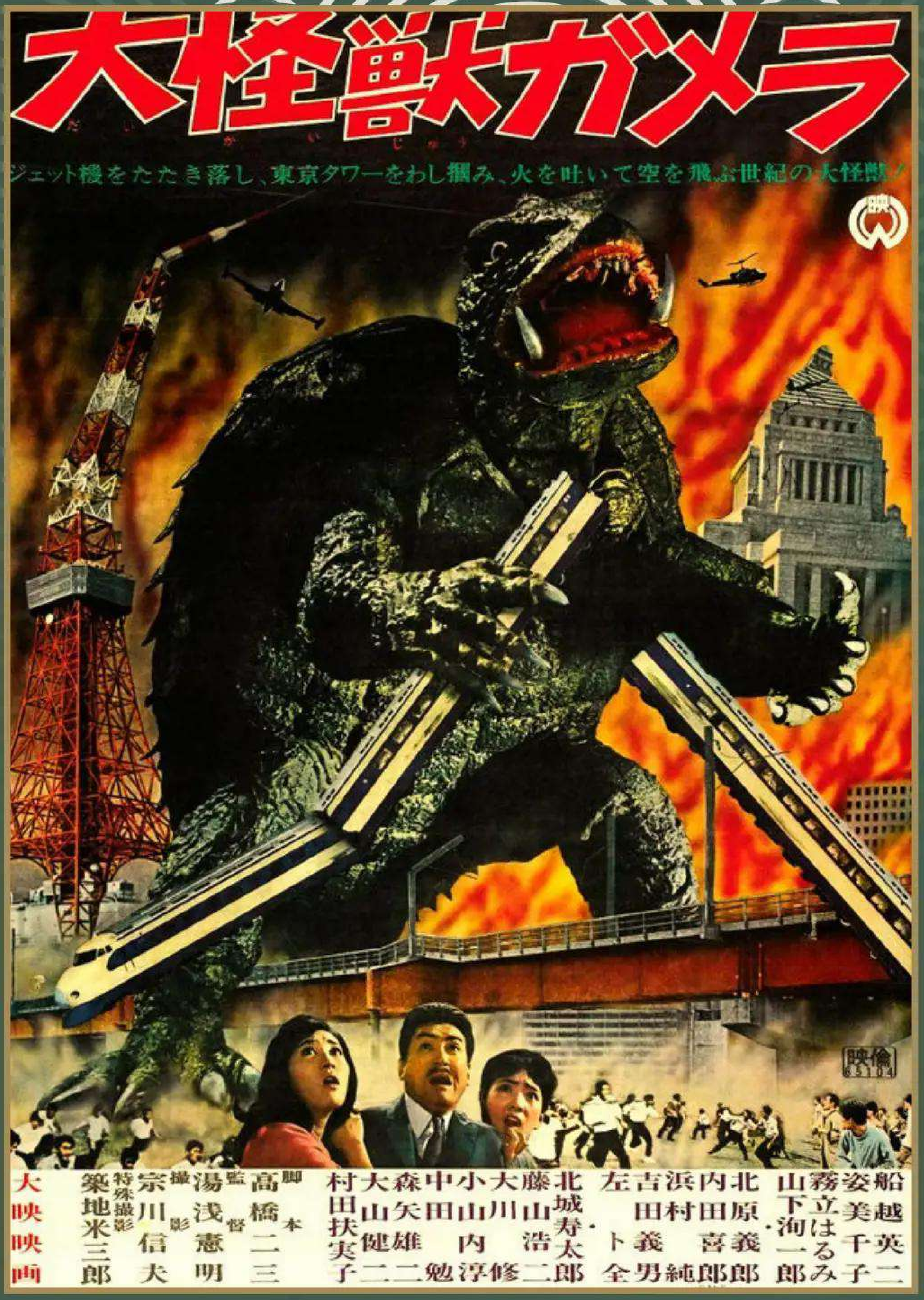
THE ULTIMATE KAIJU CLASSIC

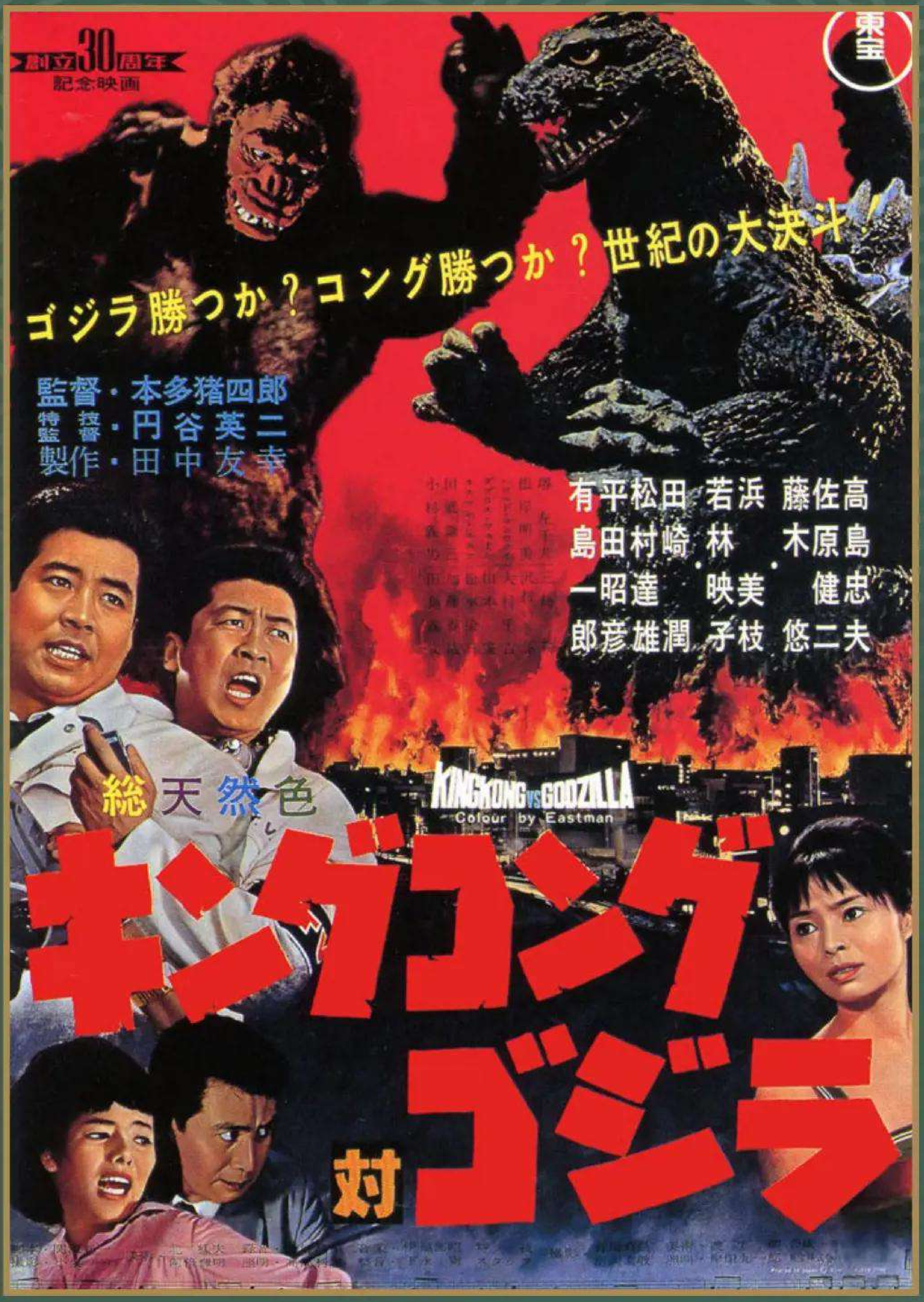
COULD THIS BE THE ULTIMATE MONSTER-MASH MOVIE FROM OVER 70 YEARS OF MAYHEM?

Arguably the peak of kaiju-carnage arrived with *Destroy All Monsters* (1968), from director Ishirō Honda. The filmmaker had sat out the previous two instalments and his return was a no-holds-barred *Jurassic Park*-style franchise entry in which all of the (friendly) monsters, including a human-sympathising Godzilla, are given their own island space to live. Unfortunately for planet Earth, a race of alien-humanoids uses some mind-alteration to convince the beasts to go on yet another city-trampling rampage. The result is some of the best popcorn destruction ever committed to celluloid!

Director Ishirō Honda could probably lay claim to being the 'Godfather' of the kaiju trend


Special effects legend Teizô Toshimitsu sculpts a miniature of Godzilla, for use in the original 1954 classic


大怪獣ガメラ
ジェット機をたたき落し、東京タワーをわし掴み、火を吐いて空を飛ぶ世紀の大怪獣！
大映映画


創立30周年記念映画
東宝
ゴジラ勝つか？コング勝つか？世紀の大決斗
監督・本多猪四郎
特技監督・円谷英二
製作・田中友幸
高島忠夫
佐原健二
藤木悠
浜美枝
若林映子
田崎潤
松村達雄
平田昭彦
有島一郎
総天然色
KING KONG VS GODZILLA
Colour by Eastman
キングコング対ゴジラ

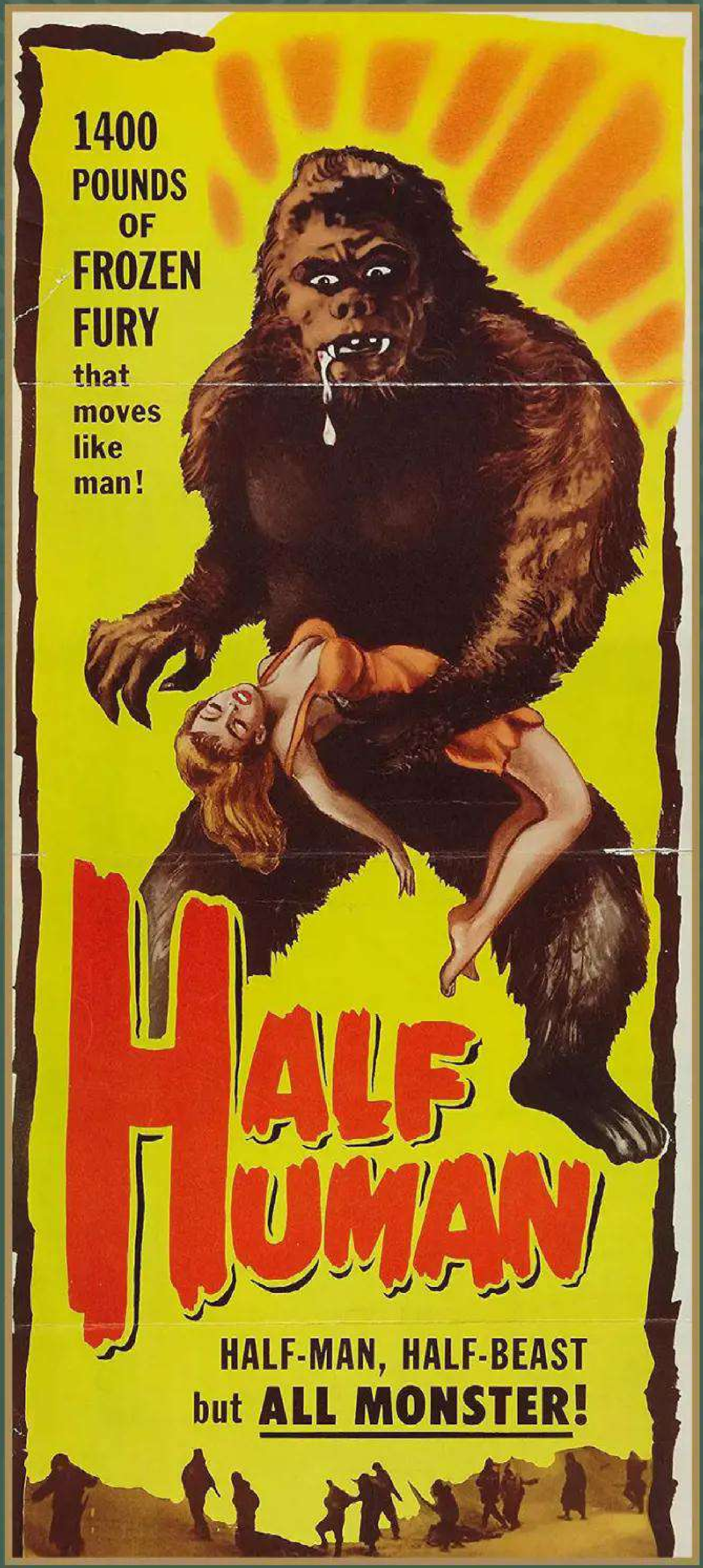
"HONDA'S ORIGINAL VISION WAS TURNED INTO WIDESCREEN MAYHEM"

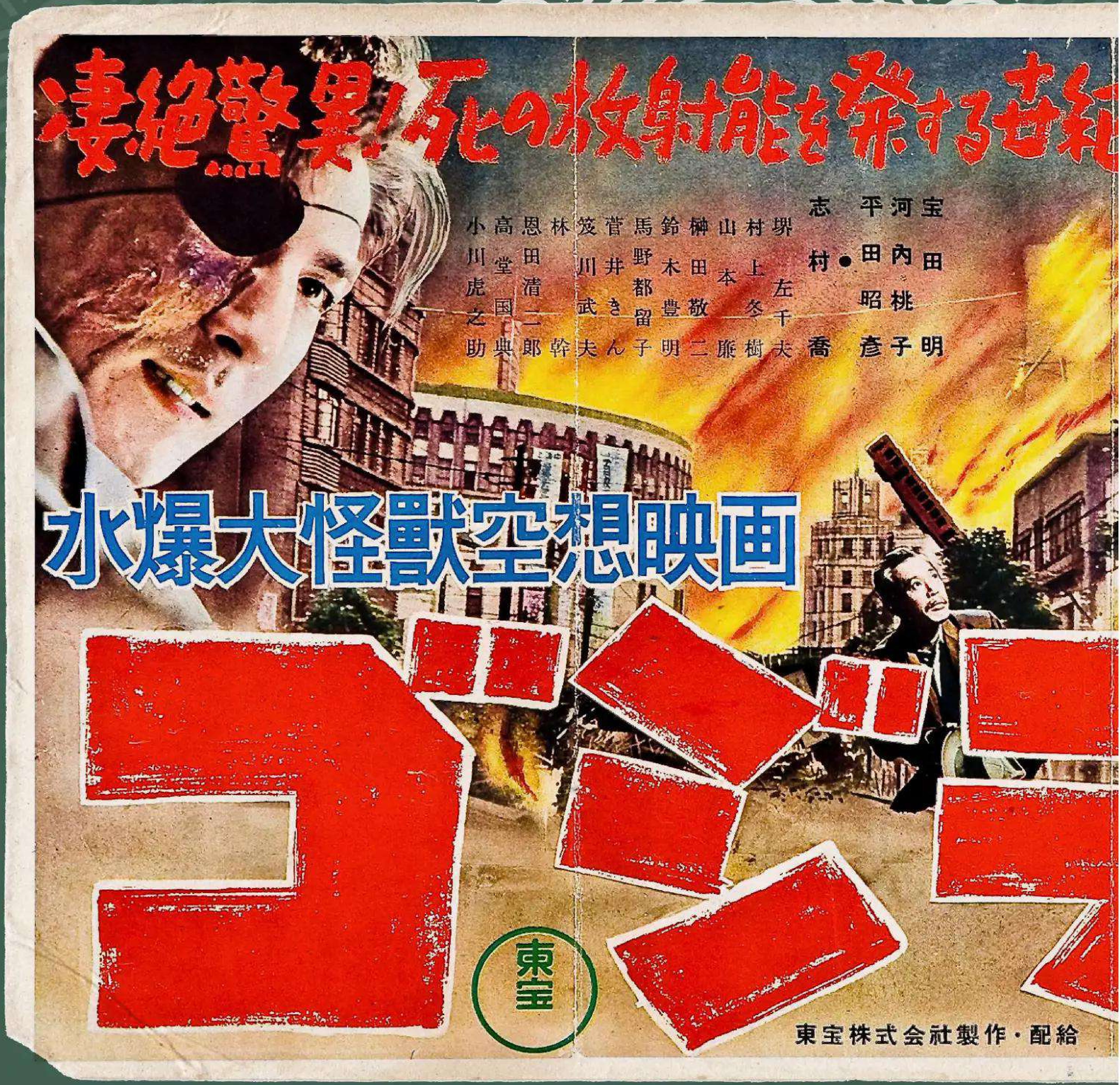
ABOVE First appearing in 1965, as advertised in this original Japanese film poster, the terrifying Gamera quickly became a kaiju staple

ABOVE RIGHT Original Japanese poster for Ishirō Honda's *King Kong vs Godzilla* (1962), the first Godzilla movie to be shot in widescreen and Technicolor.

with the work of Honda – particularly such gems as *Half Human* (1955), *Rodan* (1956), *The Mysterians* (1957) – which features a giant metal ant called Moguera that can zap opponents with death rays from its eyes – and *The War of the Gargantuas* (1966). Each of these presents Japan as a country where disaster is always looming, and destruction is a threat that everyone lives with, an obvious nod to the horrors of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. While this element of darkness is difficult not to acknowledge when revisiting this period, it is also hard not to have fun with, for instance, the brilliantly-designed Eiji Tsuburaya yeti-men of *War of the Gargantuas* – some of the most unfairly unknown figures of kaiju-lure. While the term 'cool' is thrown around a lot to describe older cult movies, these ogres are surely the epitome of sublime screen antagonists and warrant such a term.

Godzilla himself, however, would develop an elaborate mythology that – as time passed from the 1945 nuclear tragedies and Japan's surrender to the Allies – began to take on an increasingly less politicised feel. For instance, the character would obtain his own offspring in Jun Fukuda's frankly ludicrous *Son of Godzilla* (1967), gain the power of speech in Fukuda's *Godzilla vs Gigan* (1972), which sees our main-monster tussle with a beast who sports a giant circular saw from his chest, and then learn how to fly in Yoshimitsu Banno's *Godzilla vs Hedorah* (1971). This latter oddity even comes with a weepy soundtrack about saving the environment!


1400 POUNDS OF FROZEN FURY that moves like man!
HALF HUMAN
HALF-MAN, HALF-BEAST but ALL MONSTER!


凄絶驚異！死の放射能を発する奇
宝田明
河内桃子
平田昭彦
志村喬
堺左千夫
村上冬樹
山本廉
榊田敬二
鈴木豊明
馬野都留子
菅井きん
笈川武夫
林幹
恩田清二郎
高堂国典
小川虎之助
水爆大怪獣空想映画
ゴジ
東宝
東宝株式会社製作・配給

ABOVE Proving the international appeal of the initial kaiju bomb, films such as Ishirō Honda's *Half Human* (1955) would be dubbed and released across American cinemas

ABOVE RIGHT Few films have proven as influential as the original *Godzilla* (1954), although the original movie is not nearly as chaotic as its many sequels

BELOW Director Ishirō Honda on the set of *Half Human* (1955), a kaiju classic about an abominable snowman – the fictional creation's only appearance (to date) in Japanese cinema

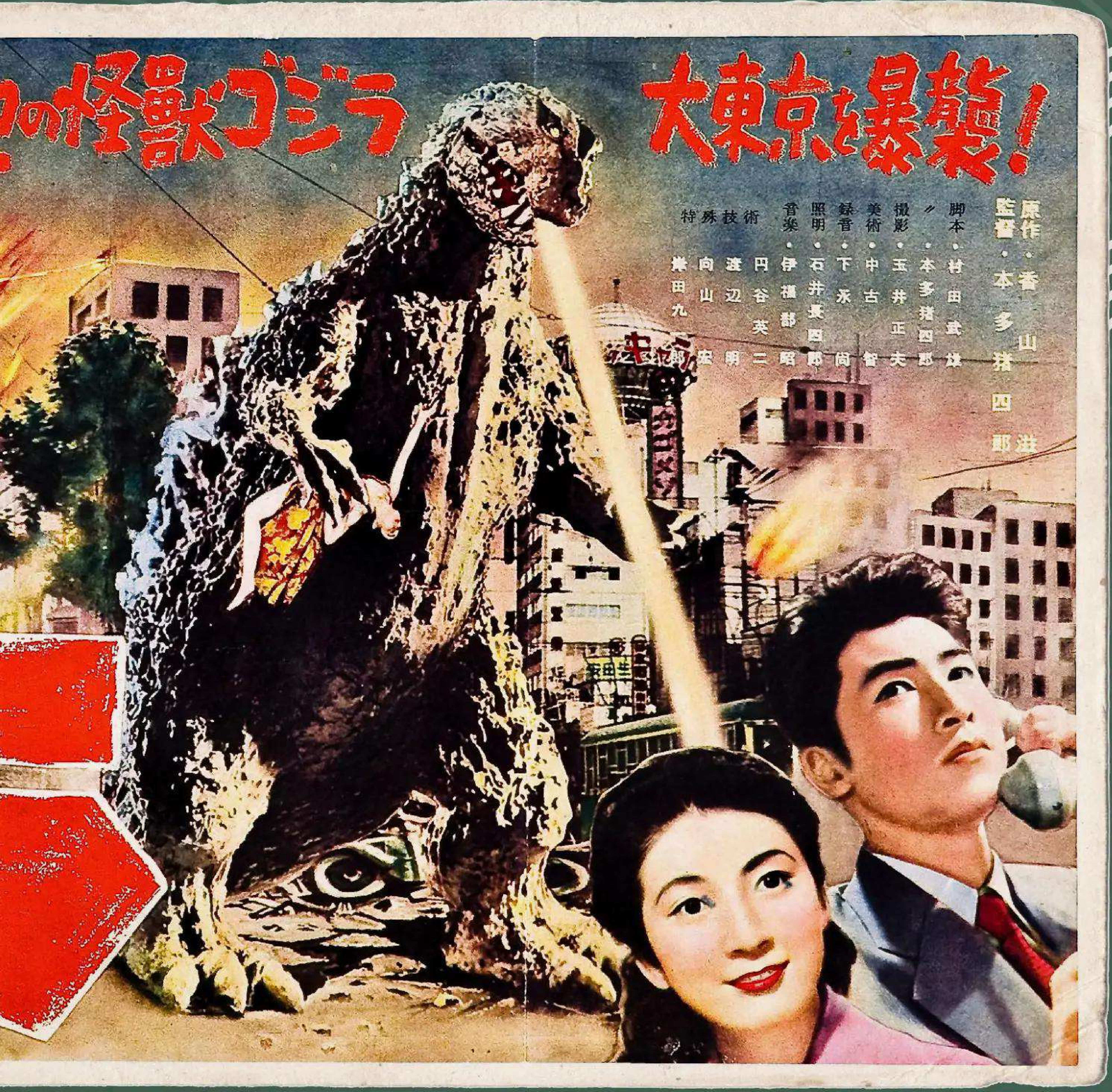
> "THE APPEAL OF THESE CHARACTERS IS THEIR JAPANESE IDENTITY"

Somewhere in Tokyo, one imagines, Ishirō Honda was wondering exactly what went wrong *and why*…

A NEW WAVE

So it was, then, that Godzilla would be put on hiatus, from 1975 until 1984, returning with a new run of seven films in the Heisei period. Although the first was arguably the weakest, a near-remake of Honda's original 1954 film called *The Return of Godzilla* (1984), much better would follow – including the brilliantly-titled *Godzilla vs SpaceGodzilla* (1994) and the conclusive *Godzilla vs Destoroyah* (1995). It was at the hands of the intimidating behemoth Destoroyah that the character's studio, Toho, slaughtered their biggest box office attraction in anticipation of his Hollywood debut in 1998. Of course, the would-be blockbuster, directed by Roland Emmerich and headlined by Matthew Broderick, became one of the most notoriously bad motion picture 'events' of its decade. Unsurprisingly, the real Japanese variant was soon to return with what became known as his 'millennium' run – a six-film marathon that begins with Takao Okawara's *Godzilla 2000*, from 1999, which pokes fun at the Emmerich flop in its opening minutes. This series would conclude with Ryuhei Kitamura's *Godzilla: Final Wars* in 2004, which sees the character face almost all of his most famous opponents, including vanquishing his rubbish CGI American counterpart in seconds during a stand-off at the Sydney Opera House.

Even so, with their introduction of digital effects, there is a feeling that the millennium films were starting to play catch-up with the biggest and best of Hollywood – not that this would stop Godzilla from once again trying his luck with an international multiplex


の怪獣ゴジラ
大東京を暴襲！
原作・香山滋
監督・本多猪四郎
脚本・村田武雄
〃・本多猪四郎
撮影・玉井正夫
美術・中古智
録音・下永尚
照明・石井長四郎
音楽・伊福部昭
特殊技術
円谷英二
渡辺明
向山宏
岸田九一郎

audience. However, unlike the 1998 disaster, the 2014 *Godzilla*, directed by Gareth Edwards, was respectful to the original source material – updating the monster's appearance but largely keeping to the slow build-up and character-driven action of the 1954 original.

Since then, kaiju has been more international than ever, proven by the success of the sequels *Godzilla: King of the Monsters* (2019), *Godzilla vs Kong* (2021) and *Godzilla x Kong: The New Empire* (2024), but what is most curious is that these mega-budgeted hits coexist with a brand-new Japanese timeline for everyone's favourite destructive-dinosaur. Beginning with *Shin Godzilla* in 2016, and followed by *Godzilla Minus One* in 2023, these latest bouts of kaiju-chaos are rooted firmly in local culture and politics – and none the worse for it, translating well enough abroad to even warrant a theatrical release of their own.

PERFECTLY JAPANESE

Therein, of course, is the central appeal of Godzilla, Gamera and the rest of the Tokyo-trampling icons – unlike such botched attempts at 'reinventing the wheel' as in the case of Tinseltown's 1998 endeavour, the central appeal of these characters is not just the sheer destruction of entire landscapes. It is also their inherent Japanese identity – initially exploding from a culture dealing with the result of nuclear terror and the loss of Empire and prestige.

What the kaiju characters provided was not just the 'safe' image of destruction, viewed in the movie theatres, but the underlying sense of a Japan that could still come together for the greater good – not just to save local cities but to be a good neighbour to the world, and prevent a *national* problem becoming an *international* emergency. Quite a difference from the country that ravaged across Asia during World War II.

Yet, this background is a key component, one that makes even the more recent blockbusters, as instigated by the 2014 rehash, so effective – and also why, in whatever guise he appears, a marauding monster such as Godzilla is inherently, and unavoidably, *Japanese*.

WHEN KAIJU CONCLUDES

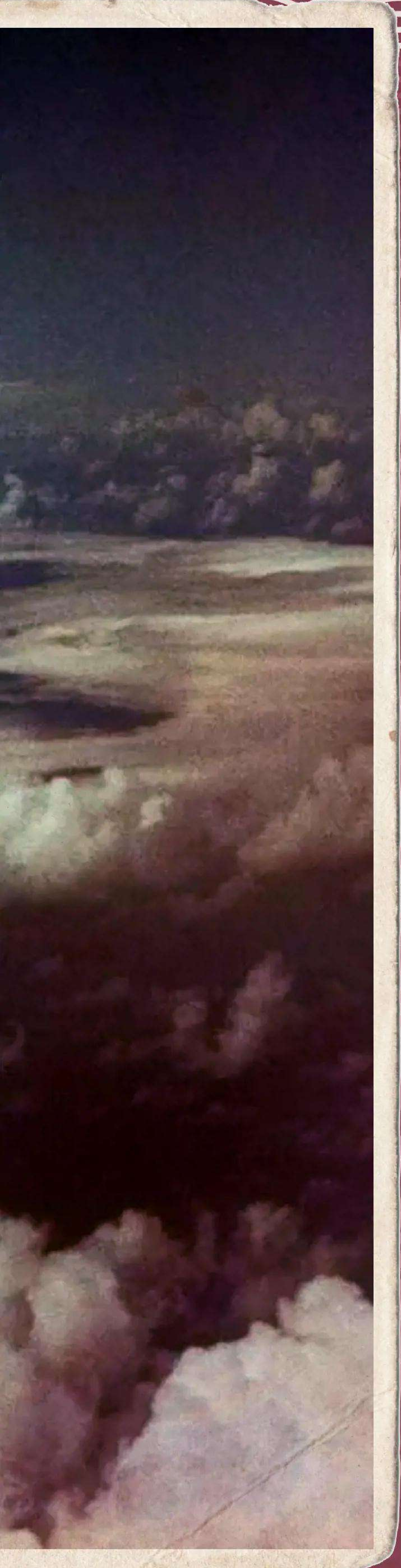
THE TIME THEY KILLED GODZILLA…

In 1995 audiences were promised the 'final' film to feature Tokyo's most feared foe – dubbed *Godzilla vs Destoroyah* and directed by Takao Okawara. Strangely, the end result holds up as one of the finest kaiju romps to date, not least of all because of a unique (but remarkably obvious) plot twist – an ageing Godzilla sports a monster-sized heart attack and, if and when he dies, such a gargantuan cardiac arrest risks becoming a nuclear bomb all of its own! It is such provocative plots that make such series as the Godzilla franchise so timeless and ripe for continued rediscovery…

Showing that you cannot kill a legendary screen icon, Godzilla even has his own Hollywood Star on the Walk of Fame in Los Angeles!

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

The American atomic bombing of the Japanese city of Nagasaki in 1945



LITTLE BOY TO ASTRO BOY

THE EFFECT OF NUCLEAR DISASTER ON JAPANESE POSTAPOCALYPTIC MYTHMAKING

WRITTEN BY **APRIL MADDEN**

Japan has a unique and terrible distinction: it's the only country that has experienced the use of atomic weapons in anger. While other communities have experienced the forced displacement, illness, and environmental consequences of weapons testing, Japan is the only nation to have been deliberately targeted with atom bombs, the forerunner to today's nuclear weapons. The attacks by the USA on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki occurred in August 1945 and were the devastating closing blows of World War II. Japan's role in the Second World War can be difficult to sit with or interrogate today – for both the post-war generations of Japanese as well as the Western appreciators of Japanese culture. However, this historical context is vital for understanding the circumstances around the atomic bombings of two Japanese cities and the nation's understandably shocked, horrified and fraught response to the attacks. This chapter of history is brutal on all sides.

CONFLICT IN CONTEXT

In August 1945 Japan had been embroiled in World War II for just shy of four years. Its dramatic entry into the wider conflict (with its devastating surprise attack on US naval ships in Hawaii's Pearl Harbor) also drew the USA, which had previously been neutral, into the war. New battle lines were drawn, with the Americans on the side of the Allies and the Japanese with the Axis. Meanwhile, Soviet Russia had switched sides from Axis to Allies six months before. It was Japan's continuing hostilities against China during the Second Sino-Japanese War that put the island nation on the side of the Nazis almost by default: its territorial ambitions on the mainland were continually being thwarted by Russia and the USA. As the old saying goes, the enemy of my enemy is my friend.

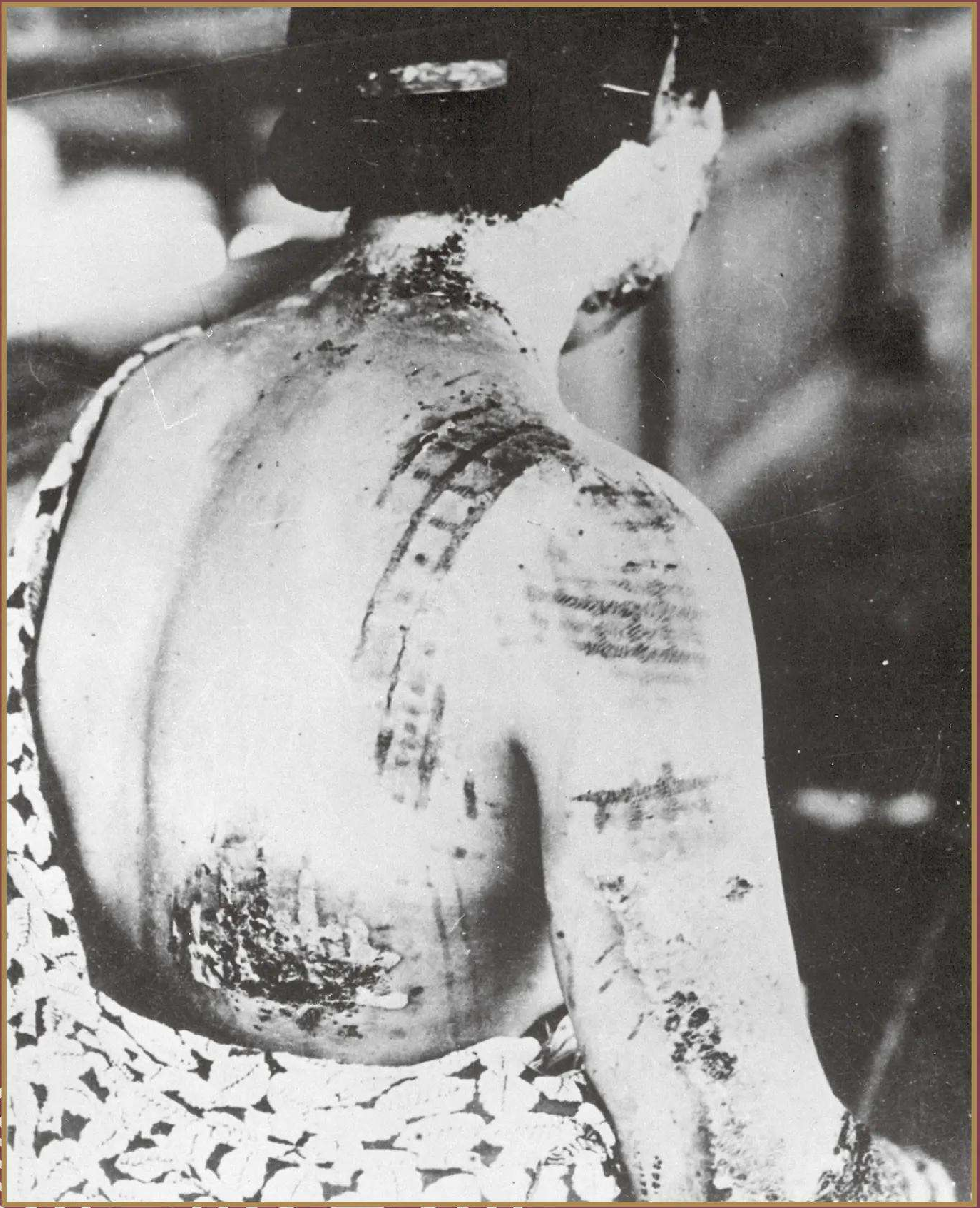
Months of diplomatic negotiations between the US and Japan – about trade, the future of the Pacific, racial equality within the League of Nations, and predominantly China – were frustratingly fruitless. Japan believed that it was fighting the good fight against Communism in its enmity with China and the Soviet Union, and couldn't understand why the USA, so fervently anti-Red, wouldn't support it against an ideology that was a common enemy of both nations. From the Western and especially American point of view, however, Japan was responsible for increasing tensions

> "HISTORICAL CONTEXT IS VITAL TO UNDERSTAND THE ATOMIC BOMBINGS"

across the Pacific and mainland Asia. France was enraged at its imperialistic interference in French Indochina and the world at large was horrified by 1937's notorious Nanjing Massacre, which saw the brutalisation and murder of tens of thousands of ordinary Chinese civilians.

The USA, once Japan's key ally in the modernisation programmes of the Meiji era, now enacted sweeping sanctions that cut Japan off from the American oil products and technology that it so desperately relied on in its relentless drive for modernity. Growing increasingly angry and impatient, believing that it was being disrespected and exploited by the West, feeling that it was being treated as an inferior instead of a modern nation in control of its own destiny on the world stage, Japan's increasingly militaristic government (the role of Emperor Hirohito in wartime decision-making is a subject of much debate) decided to retaliate.

The Japanese attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor, coming out of the blue, sent the USA into World War II with a ferocity that can scarcely be imagined. Ironically, the Japanese high command believed it would be an attack it was contemplating on British Southeast Asian colonies (including Singapore) that would bring the US into the war; Pearl Harbor was mooted as a pre-emptive strike that would disable American naval capability beforehand, keeping US forces out of the conflict as they dealt with the attack and its aftermath. In this Japan was horribly, terribly wrong. The Americans entered the war on fire with patriotic fervour, and while initially much of this was channelled by necessity into the war in Europe, once Berlin fell and victory in Europe was achieved, the US was free to turn its attention to the still-intractable Japan. By then the US had at its disposal the atomic capabilities revealed by the now-notorious physicist J Robert Oppenheimer and his staff at the Manhattan Project nuclear weapons research programme. It unleashed them on the Japanese cities of Hiroshima (6 May) and Nagasaki (9 May) in 1945.



DEVASTATING EFFECTS

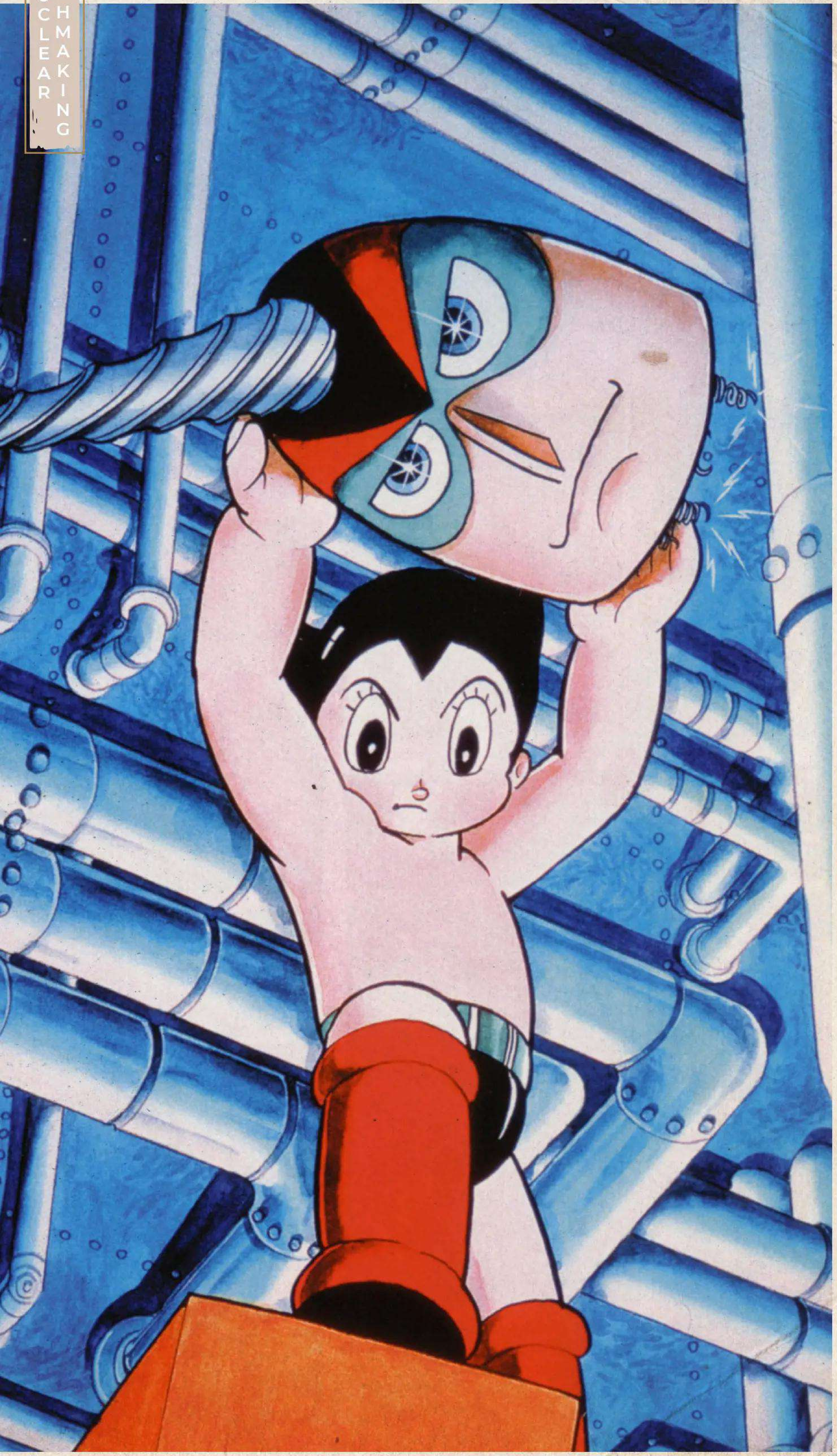
The effect that the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki had on the Japanese psyche is almost incomprehensible. Nearly a quarter of a million people died. The bombings themselves consisted of a boom and a single flash of bright white light, so vastly different to the bedlam of a typical air raid that it was hard for survivors to believe that entire cities had been struck at once, each by a single blast. The hundreds of little fires caused by each explosion soon merged into citywide firestorms. The sky was dark, and the streets choked with dust. Those who weren't instantly annihilated by the blasts were left with indelible imprints of them: one photo taken in the wake of the attacks shows a survivor scarred with the pattern of the pretty springtime kimono she was wearing, the black design of the print having absorbed thermal radiation while the white fabric reflected it. Other survivors seemed to stumble uninjured from the wreckage of their homes, only to succumb to the bizarre effects of radiation sickness a few days later. Subsequent generations would be far more prone to devastating and sometimes visually dramatic cancers and other illnesses.

The absent mother of Studio Ghibli's *My Neighbor Totoro*, sequestered in hospital for an unspecified but serious illness, was a parental reality for many Japanese children of the time. These horrors all had a profound effect on the Japanese worldview, but under the American Occupation that immediately

> "THE AMERICANS ENTERED THE WAR ON FIRE WITH PATRIOTIC FERVOUR."

LEFT A survivor of the 1945 atomic bombings of Japan, her skin burned with the pattern of her kimono due to thermonuclear radiation

RIGHT The devastation of the 1945 bombings would understandably go on to shape Japan's worldview



followed the end of the war, Japanese people were prohibited from discussing the negative effects of the bombings. Nonetheless their profound horror, rage, and trauma needed an outlet, and it found it in the Shōwa era mythmaking of kaiju movies, manga and anime.

THE MIGHTY ATOM

In 1952, mangaka Osamu Tezuka debuted a comic strip in the magazine *Shōnen*. *The Mighty Atom*, also known as *Astro Boy*, who gained his own anime TV series in 1963, was the West's first taste of Japanese media. He was typically introduced to children in the USA by army brats whose fathers had served in the Occupation, with 104 episodes of the TV show eventually dubbed into English and shown on US TV, while an unlicensed comic was published in the US in 1965 (an authorised English translation of the original manga was eventually published in 2002).

Astro Boy was ostensibly a poster child for technology, particularly atomic energy. He was a robot powered by nuclear technology, and his adventures were full of good-guy derring-do scenarios, as he battled evil robots, aliens, and occasionally humans, sometimes introducing children to iconic figures from the histories of science and philanthropy.

But this cheerful little symbol of Japan's drive for progress has a darker heart. Astro Boy's in-universe creator, Dr Tenma, built the little robot as a substitute for his son, killed in a car accident. Despite Astro Boy's cleverness, heroism, and capabilities, Dr Tenma finds that he just can't quite make himself love this atomic robot child like a real one. Astro Boy prefers cubes to flowers; he perhaps has no soul, but he certainly does not possess the immanent sensibility of wabi-sabi – predicated on the concepts of understanding and cherishing impermanence, suffering, and emptiness – which is something that Japanese culture required even of its warriors.

Many Japanese parents who had lost their children in the bombings no doubt felt the same way about the golden age of progress the American Occupation insisted it was providing them: was it good enough when compared to the lives of their children? Viewed through this lens, *Astro Boy* becomes a sad cipher for the question, "At what cost?".

Astro Boy was the first piece of Japanese media to break in the West, but its underlying story hints at disaffection with the post-war Occupation

ABOVE LEFT The Daigo Fukuryū Maru was deemed to be safe in 1976 and is now on display in Tokyo

ABOVE The explosion and cover-up of what happened in Bikini Atoll gave rise to characters like Godzilla

STRANGE BEASTS

In March 1954, while Japan was still busy picking up the pieces from the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Lucky Dragon 5 incident occurred. Now embroiled in the Cold War with the Soviet Union, the USA had continued apace with nuclear research, and on 1 March 1954 as part of its Operation Castle project, it launched what is still the most powerful US nuclear device ever to be detonated, at Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands. A thousand times more powerful than the bomb that devastated Hiroshima, the resultant explosion was nearly five miles across and could be seen 250 miles away, while the resulting mushroom cloud pooled into the air at 360 miles an hour, reaching the size of a small mountain, and radioactively contaminating an area of the Pacific Ocean within a radius of more than 7,000 square miles. Just outside the USA's theoretical 'danger zone' for the explosion, near Midway Atoll, sailed a Japanese fishing boat, the Daigo Fukuryū Maru, or Lucky Dragon 5.

All 23 members of the boat's crew, some of them elderly, developed acute radiation sickness. Initially continuing to sail through headaches, nausea and gastric symptoms, they turned for home as they began to sicken further. Storms kept them at sea until 14 March, when they presented at Yaizu Public Hospital with red eyes, darkened skin, hair loss, and bleeding. One of the crew had had the presence of mind to save some of the ash falling from the sky in the aftermath of the blast; it was tested and found to be nuclear fallout. The USA, which had been conducting its nuclear tests in secrecy, leant heavily on the Japanese government, still very much under the American thumb, to cover up the incident. The men were transferred to a hospital in Tokyo, and American scientists were frequently present during their treatment. The Japanese Foreign Minister apparently spoke to the crew several times about this being a necessity, but they were given the distinct impression it was a political, rather than a medical, one. Despite attempts to suppress the incident the news got out, and understandably many Japanese felt that yet again they were under attack by a capricious behemoth that had no truly justifiable reason to persecute them. American Occupation had ended only two years before, and because the proscription on discussing the nuclear bombings was still fresh in many Japanese minds, a monstrous analogue for these feelings was created instead: Gojira (Godzilla), the King of Monsters.

Godzilla's in-universe origin story is as explicit as it was possible to be at the time. Released a scant six months after the Lucky Dragon 5 incident by a film industry that was still small enough to be agile and responsive, the original 1954 film tells the story of the disappearance of two Japanese ships, the Eiko Maru and the Bingo Maru. Fishermen begin to report something dangerous in the water, and as reporters flock to investigate and locals petition the Tokyo government (which wrings its hands and tries to suppress news of the incident) for disaster relief, a storm breaks, and out of the maelstrom emerges a gigantic monster; angry, rapacious, and with radioactive breath. This is Godzilla. As the movie develops, it's revealed that the giant creature, once a denizen of the ocean depths, has been disturbed, deranged and transformed by nuclear testing in the Pacific until he awakens, apparently immortal, now capable of existing on land as well as at sea, and goes on the rampage. Scientists come to believe that they can kill Godzilla using a device called an Oxygen Destroyer, but its inventor, terrified that a superpower will weaponise the device against humanity if he reveals it, burns all of his research before sacrificing himself to destroy Godzilla with the device, taking its secret to his grave. The government scientist who first discovered the monster states his belief that if nuclear testing continues, Godzilla, or another monster like him, will rise again. The parallels are obvious.

MOTORCYCLES AND ATOMIC BOMBS

Godzilla gave rise to a wide range of kaiju movies – the term comes from Japanese folklore and means 'strange beasts' – some including the not-so monstrous Mothra, a mystical protectress of Japan, civilisation or

> "GODZILLA'S IN-UNIVERSE ORIGIN STORY IS AS EXPLICIT AS POSSIBLE"

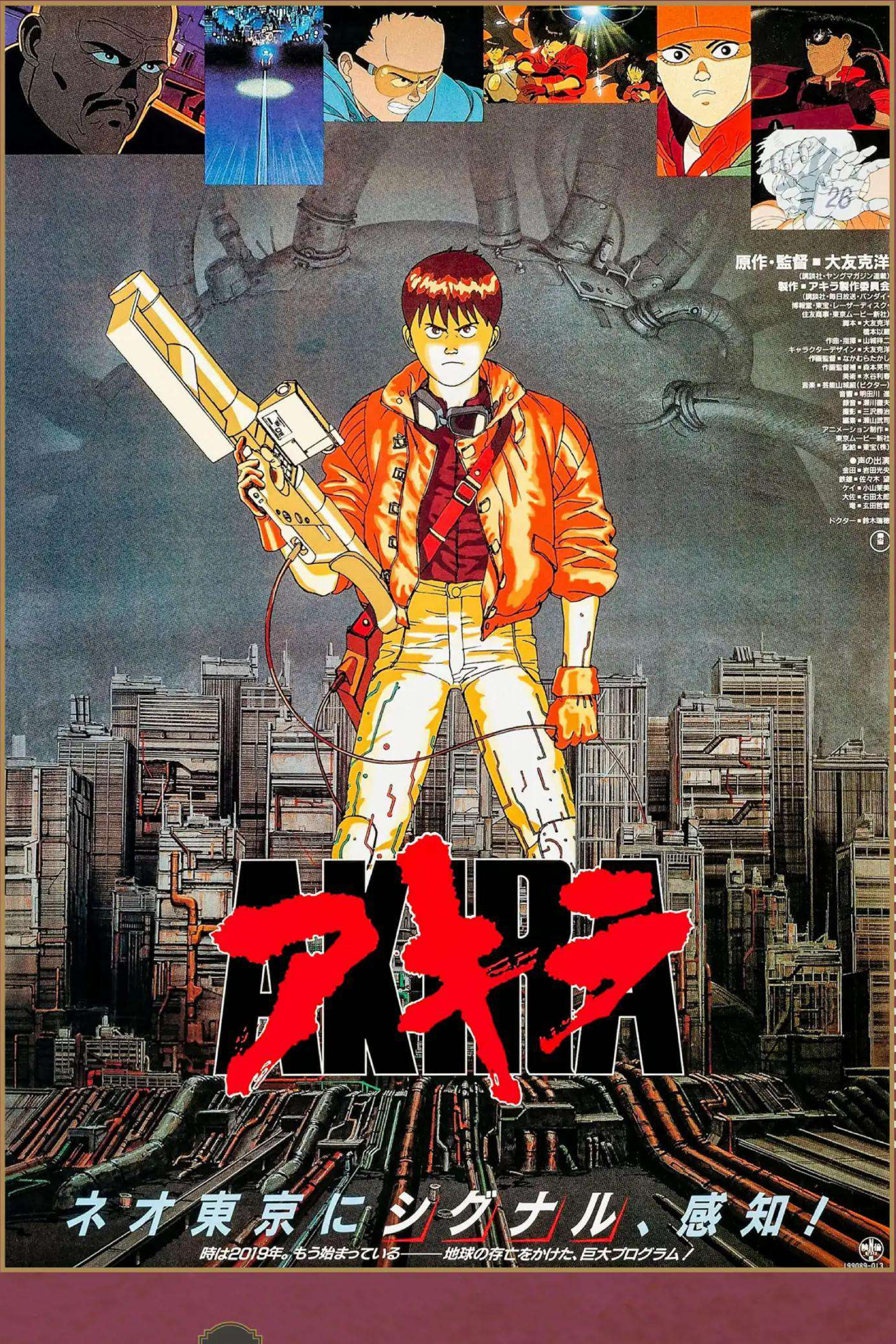
Godzilla is the first of the kaiju movies; the word kaiju comes from Japanese folklore and means 'strange beasts' the entire Earth, who is accompanied by fairies and occasionally goes on the offensive against Godzilla and other aggressive kaiju. But as memories of American Occupation began to fade, more Japanese writers, artists and film makers were prepared to interrogate the human effects of radiation and nuclear fallout. The kaijin, or 'strange person' had been a device in both pre-modern and 20th-century Japanese literature – it was popular in the 1930s – but combined with the physical effects of radiation sickness this idea gave rise to people made even stranger by unfettered science. Rather than being fey – half in the spirit world like the sorcerers, yokai and kami of legend – post-nuclear kaijin were not just mutable any more, they were mutated, none more so than the unfortunate Tetsuo Shima, tragic antihero of iconic 1988 anime, *Akira*.

The movie's plot alludes to a world war that wipes out Tokyo; in its wake, Neo Tokyo rises. Here we find motorcycle gang The Capsules, led by Shōtarō Kaneda. During a dramatic chase scene, Kaneda's best friend Tetsuo crashes into Takashi, a mutant human with ESP powers, who has escaped from a secretive government lab. In the aftermath of the crash, when Kaneda and the gang are arrested before escaping with Kei, an activist whose resistance organisation hopes to free people like Takashi – known as espers – from their sinister captors, Tetsuo is taken to hospital. It is while there that scientists discover he is beginning to develop powers akin to Takashi and his brethren.

Akira reaches back to the Lucky Dragon 5 incident as it explores the suffering Tetsuo experiences. In August 1954, the captain of the Daigo Fukuryū Maru, as well as experiencing the physical symptoms shared by the rest of his crew, deteriorated critically and began to hallucinate wildly. In his violent rages, he eventually had to be tied to his hospital bed before succumbing completely, becoming the first person to die from the effects of a modern hydrogen bomb. In *Akira*, Tetsuo suffers from headaches and delirium, and the scientists monitoring him realise that he is beginning to develop powers on the level of Akira, the esper who causes the destruction of Tokyo. As Tetsuo's fellow espers try to use their psychic powers to kill him in the hope of averting another cataclysm, Kaneda and Kei try frantically to free them. Tetsuo, by now hostile to his former friends as well as everyone else, is hellbent on liberating Akira from his cryogenic grave beneath Tokyo's stadium (fans have noted *Akira*'s explicit foreshadowing of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics and its postponement due to disaster, which gives rise to some intriguing internet debates about ESP). Weakened by combat, Tetsuo begins to mutate, erupting into a mound of quivering flesh that begins to absorb all around it. Eventually Akira awakens and creates an interdimensional singularity, destroying Tokyo once more and transcending Tetsuo to a new plane of existence. *Akira* is a parable, like *Godzilla* and *Astro Boy*, about the dangers of weaponised science run amok, and in these postmodern fables the reality-warping gods, monsters, heroes and magicians of Japanese folklore find new guises that see them become mutated, inhuman, and strange in the wake of disaster. It is a story that Japan, sadly, is only too qualified to tell.

"AKIRA REACHES BACK TO THE LUCKY DRAGON 5 INCIDENT"

Akira, one of Japan's most famous movies worldwide, has a potent message about the misuse of science as a weapon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原作・監督■大友克洋
製作■アキラ製作委員会
AKIRA
アキラ
ネオ東京にシグナル、感知！
時は2019年。もう始まっている——地球の存亡をかけた、巨大プログラム！

IMAGES Getty Images, Alamy

JOLTS FROM JAPAN

THE COUNTRY THAT MADE GHOUL-GIRLS-FROM-BEYOND-THE GRAVE A SCARY MOVIE STAPLE HAS CRAFTED FIRST-CLASS FRIGHT FILMS FOR OVER 70 YEARS…

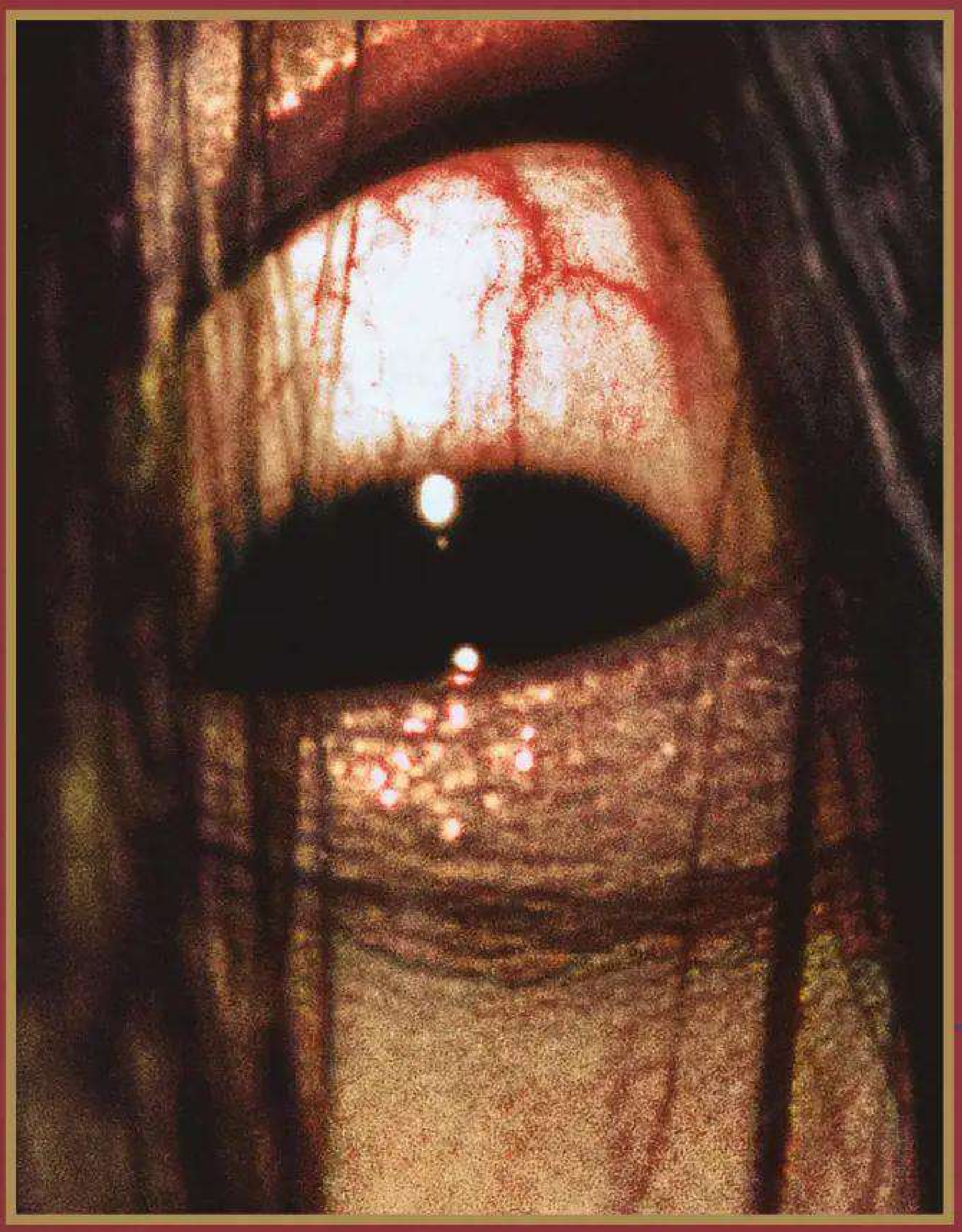
WRITTEN BY **CALUM WADDELL**

Ah Japan, the Land of the Rising Sun, a bucket-list destination for many, a formidable soft power – from anime and manga to J-pop and, of course, home to one of the world's biggest film industries. However, aside from *Godzilla*, no motion picture has helped to 'break out' Japanese identity internationally more than Hideo Nakata's *Ring* – released to critical acclaim in 1998, remade in South Korea one year later, and adapted into a Hollywood blockbuster starring Naomi Watts in 2002. While, at the time, Nakata's achievement seemed to burst out of nowhere, the fact is that Tokyo-based producers had been playing around with the image of the local legend of the Kuchisake-Onna (the figure of a mutilated and killed woman who returns from the dead to enact revenge) for decades prior.

HISTORICAL HORROR

Although the story of a dead-but-restless 'slit mouthed woman' – cut from mouth-to-ear – dates back to the 17th century, it would be Kenji Mizoguchi's period-set shocker *Ugetsu* (1953) that initially brought this tale to theatregoers, albeit without a sliced-and-diced facial appearance for its antagonist. Although many followers of Japanese genre-jaunts might believe that it is the far better-known *Onibaba* (1964), from director Kaneto Shindō, that introduced audiences to fear-from-the-Far-East, it was actually *Ugetsu* that first depicted an angst-ridden female spirit. Although quite melancholy in its execution, *Ugetsu* undoubtedly set the stage for later, more modern J-horror outings that feature a 'clingy' ghoul-girl, such Nakata's classic, *Dark Water* (2002).

There is, nonetheless, little doubting that *Onibaba* and Shindō's follow-up, *Kuroneko* (1968), *really* mapped out the path that



LEFT The beady eye of the villainous Sadako became part of horror lore and is imbedded in the genre's most famous images, alongside Jason's hockey mask and Freddy's razor-glove

The terrifying Sadako (renamed as Samara in the Hollywood remakes) as she appears, played by Rie Inō, in Hideo Nakata's original *Ring* (1998)

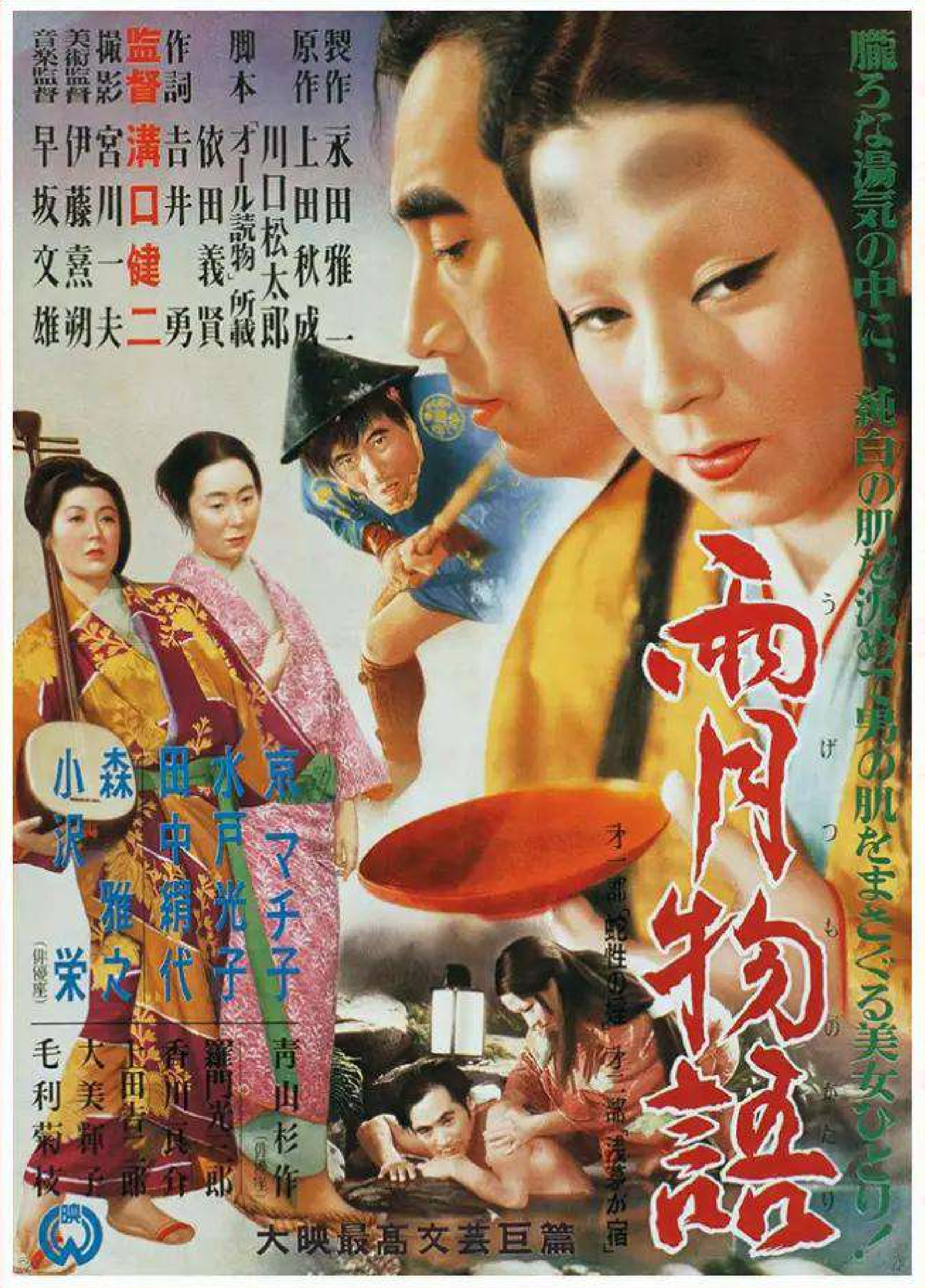
SOUTH KOREAN CREEPIES

HOW JAPAN'S OLD RIVAL CRAFTED ITS OWN SPOOKY CINEMA

Following the success of *Ring*, Korean director Kim Dong-bin offered a local rehash entitled *The Ring Virus* in 1999, with minimal differences from its Japanese counterpart. A success at the Seoul box office, South Korean horror was soon off-and-running, with highlights including Ahn Byeong-ki's *Phone* (2002), Kim Jee-woon's *A Tale of Two Sisters* (2003), Pil-sung Yim's *Hansel and Gretel* (2007) and Kim Yong-gyun's unfairly obscure *Killer Toon* (2013). For an especially localised goosebump-raiser, check out Bong Man-dae's *Cinderella* (2006), which mixes *Ring*-style ghost-girls in a story that damns the country's obsession with plastic surgery.

Director Kim Jee-woon made one of the defining Korean horror films with *A Tale of Two Sisters*

> "THAT GLOBAL-GHOST-GIRL OF RING REINVENTED THE COUNTRY'S CINEMATIC CREEPERS"


雨月物語
大映最高文芸巨篇

ABOVE An original Japanese movie poster advertising the forthcoming frights of Kenji Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* (1953)

RIGHT Director Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu* signals, perhaps, the start of what later became known as J-horror

Tokyo-terror would generally adhere to – namely a male protagonist, a ghostly female antagonist, and a slow, but achingly tense pace, concluding with some kind of supernatural revelation and a grim, nihilistic conclusion. Yes, the same dark and dingy, 'no one gets out of here alive and/or without titanic levels of trauma' that inform Nakata's later *Ring* and *Dark Water*, as well as such franchises as *The Grudge* (beginning with Takashi Shimizu's 2002 shocker) and *Tomie* (instigated by Ataru Oikawa in 1998), can be traced back to *Onibaba* and *Kureneko*. Indeed, the box office appeal of *Onibaba* was almost instantly influential – with Masaki Kobayashi's super-stylish anthology spine-tingler *Kwaidan* (1964) arriving in cinemas soon after and even finding itself nominated for a Best Foreign Language Film Academy Award. Looking back at this period, Shimizu states, "For me, *Kwaidan* is one of the top five horror films ever produced. That and *Onibaba* were a huge influence on me when I made *The Grudge*. I think what is unique about Japanese horror is that we, in many cases, avoid straightforward expressions of fear – such as a masked killer with a knife. Instead, we choose to explore more psychological fears. I would say that our horror is heavily influenced by Buddhism, cultural and historical events and also curses. We Japanese are quite superstitious about things like curses [laughs]."

INTERNATIONAL INFLUENCES

Unlike blockbusters such as *Ring* and *The Grudge*, however, these earlier films are all set in a Japan from centuries earlier – typically during a more feudal, and even medieval, era in which war reigns supreme (*Onibaba*, for example, introduces a pair of 14th-century maidans who murder soldiers for their belongings. One of the antagonists discovers a demonic mask that becomes prised to her face and, when removed, reveals hideous 'slit woman' disfigurement). But all of this changed from a most unlikely source – namely Nobuhiko Obayashi's *House* (or *Hausu*) from 1977. Far less indebted to folklore and local legend than the films preceding it, *House* still highlights images of demonic, dark-haired, pale-faced, supernatural-sirens but is a kaleidoscope of colourful carnage and packed with dark comedy set pieces and even critical nods to Japan's imperial past.

The story tells of a present-day schoolgirl called Gorgeous (yes, really) who invites some of her friends to spend their summer vacation at her aunt's secluded countryside manor. The only catch is that the establishment is haunted – and what follows is a surreal story of possession, flashbacks to various pasts, and released spirits, that result from the creepy to the kooky. Although *House* flopped at the Japanese box office, its hyperkinetic pacing and Mario Bava/Dario Argento-inspired

Takashi Shimizu gets into the 'spirit' with a ribbon-cutting ceremony for the premiere of his Hollywood sequel *The Grudge 2* (2006)

sense of a world in which anything can transpire at any time, no matter how lurid or nonsensical, led to other localised celluloid creep-shows that also took considerable inspiration from foreign directors. But it wasn't necessarily a case of J-horror becoming depleted of its 'Japanese' element, rather that as the once closed-off country slowly transformed into a more internationalised society, so too did the likes of the Lucio Fulci-ish *Evil Dead Trap* (1988), from Toshiharu Ikeda, and Shinya Tsukamoto's David Cronenberg-influenced *Tetsuo* (1989) and *Hiruko the Goblin* (1991) prove refreshingly avant-garde with their mix of East and West.

RING IN THE CHANGES

Yet, it would *still* be that global-ghost-girl of Sadako in *Ring* that reinvented the country's cinematic creepers for a whole new generation. The story of a haunted video tape that unleashes the wrath of a drowned young woman, who one week later appears and literally scares her victim to death, not only draws on Japan's own brutal experiment in Empire-building (a 'secret' that will not stay

RIGHT J-horror perhaps reached its final 'paranormal peak' with the cinematic stand-off between *Sadako vs Kayako* – proudly hosted by Koji Shiraishi, pictured here at the 2016 premiere.

buried as long as survivors whisper about such events as the notorious Rape of Nanking), but is genuinely terrifying. Ultimately, *Ring* was that rare proposition – a horror film which, in any language, is every bit as hair-raising and sweat-inducing as its marketing materials threatened. “It might surprise a lot of people, but I am not a huge fan of horror films”, affirms Nakata, the director of *Ring*. “It became my fate, perhaps, and *Ring* is a crucial part of my career – but I was never someone who followed this genre or anything.” He goes on to say, “It was a very challenging film to make because it dealt with supernatural things that were, to me, maybe quite stupid or unrealistic and it is always difficult to make this believable. For example, the absurd idea of a woman crawling through a television set – but that worked, and it is the most famous image I ever filmed [*laughs*].”

J-HORROR GOES HOLLYWOOD

HOW TOKYO CAME TO TINSELTOWN

When J-horror blew up the box office with Gore Verbinski’s *The Ring*, in 2002, it was only inevitable that other cash-ins (and sequels) would soon follow. Looking back, however, and not many are worth seeking out. Takashi Shimizu’s *The Grudge* (2004) is so identical to the original that it offers little new. Walter Salles tried to redo Hideo Nakata’s *Dark Water* in 2005, but the end result is a supernatural slog. Even less interesting is Jim Sorenzo’s *Pulse* (2006) and Éric Valette’s *One Missed Call* (2008). Yet with the appearance of *Rings*, from F Javier Gutiérrez in 2017, and a new *The Grudge* in 2020, it is doubtful that we have seen the last of ghost-girls-gone-wild…

Fans still dress as Sadako at horror conventions to this day, attesting to the character’s lasting legacy

No surprise, then, that Nakata was rushed into producing a sequel, *Ring 2* in 1999, which delves into Sadako’s back story with equally chilling effect, before handing over the reigns of a disappointing prequel, *Ring 0*, to director Norio Tsuruta the following year. By now, though, the proverbial J-horror gates were well and truly blown open – especially as DVD showed that an eager international audience was also hungry for more and more stories of undead Japanese denizens haunting their hapless victims. Although *The Grudge* would become the most celebrated of the many terror-titles that followed, Nakata’s heartstring-pulling *Dark Water*, about a young mother who draws the attention of a drowned child, and Tsurata’s *Premonition* (2004), which follows a man who unwittingly becomes aware of future tragedies, are arguably the two standouts to emerge from the period. Furthermore, unlike so many concurrent films of the time, the Japanese horror boom would often feature more ‘lived-in’ and mature characters, offering a welcome break from tormented teenagers.

There *were* exceptions to this rule, though, such as Sion Sono’s twosome of the satirical *Suicide Club* (2001) and the bizarre *Exte: Hair Extensions* (2007), as well as Takashi Miike’s *One Missed Call* (2003). However, in general, the legacy left by *Ring*, and those that followed, was the creation of a uniquely diverse world of freak folk tales that impacted on a much broader family unit.

Chiaki Kuriyama, the star of *Exte: Hair Extensions* (about a ghost that literally slaughters her victims via manipulating their head-mops), sums up the appeal of the period as, “I began to notice that men were generally more scared than women when I saw these movies with an audience. I liked that, I really enjoyed seeing how the audience reacted. I think my film was a success because, well, I do think bad hair days are every girl’s worse nightmare!”

In fact, the desire to offer onlookers bad dreams seemed to be the goal of many Japanese directors in the first decade of the new millennium. Kiyoshi Kurosawa’s *Pulse* (2001), which saw ungodly forces using the internet in order to spook a tech-savvy ensemble became an instant classic, while Shimizu took to redoing his first two *Grudge* films in Hollywood before returning home for a technological experiment of his own, with his haunted-hospital thriller *Shock Labyrinth 3D* (2009).

NO MORE SCREAMS?

As the millennium turned into the noughties, J-horror would find itself with various regional competitors – South Korea and Thailand being the prime contenders insofar as quantity goes – and as so many of the big hits got redone in America, from *Ring* and *The Grudge* to *Dark Water*, *One Missed Call* and *Pulse*, it seemed anyone’s guess where the trend would go next. The answer, however, was satire – with *Sadako 3D* arriving in 2012, leading to a 2013 sequel, before a crossover with *The Grudge* – *Sadako vs Kayako* – in 2016. While not without their own individual merits, regardless of how damning the critical reception was, such (if you can pardon the pun) ‘grudge matches’ are typically an example of a franchise’s final desperate breaths. No surprise, then, that subsequent attempts to reinvent J-horror’s most enduring characters – with Nakata’s return for *Sadako* in 2019, a later 2022

'parody' (dubbed *Sadako DX*) and a new American *Grudge* in 2020 – have struggled to find the same audience that made the prototypes such a sensation.

Nevertheless, the glory days of J-horror reached heights that few fear-flicks ever achieve – and captivated an audience across the world, hungry for an especially unique Japanese twist on 'things that go bump in the night'. Or, as viewed by Shimizu, "I think a lot of Western horror fans think that horror movies are big hits in Japan, but it is actually quite rare for a film in this genre to take off in my country. There have not been many horror films as successful as *The Grudge* and its various sequels – maybe just Hideo Nakata's *Dark Water* and, of course, his *Ring* series… so to have something that still endures is a rare honour indeed."

ABOVE Stars Nanako Matsushima and Hiroyuki Sanada hunt down the source of a haunted video tape in Hideo Nakata's classic *Ring* (1998)

RIGHT Prequel entry *Ring 0* (also known as *Ring: Birthday*), from 2000, perhaps suffered from not having original creator Hideo Nakata at the helm

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MYTHS AND MONSTERS: LEVELLED UP!

HOW VIDEO GAMES HAVE REPACKAGED JAPANESE MYTHS AND MONSTERS FOR A GLOBAL GENERATION

WRITTEN BY **ALICE PATTILLO**

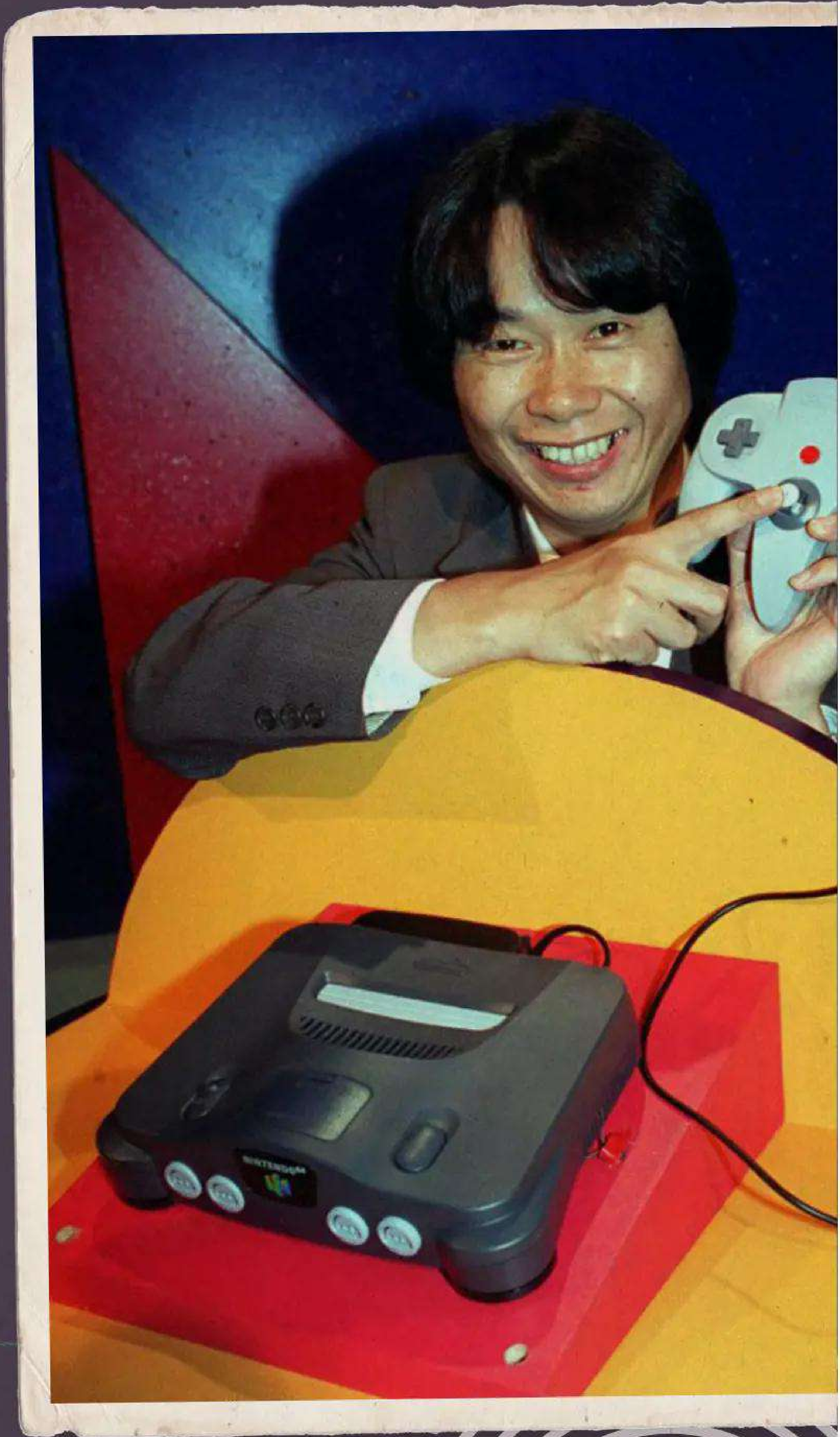
Japan has gifted the world with many modern mythologies through the mediums of film, animation and comic books. They've reinvented their existing national mythologies and launched unique folklore-inspired characters, such as monsters like Godzilla and warriors like the samurai and the ninja, into contemporary global consciousness. But, arguably, Japan's most significant contributions to modern popular culture, particularly in the West, have been through their domination of the video game industry, creating some of gaming's most iconic characters and filtering existing myths and monsters through a new, interactive lens and creating whole new mythologies that have an enduring, global appeal.

A MODERN MYTHOS

Just as ancient mythology and religion once was key in shaping a nation's identity, in this new, globalised world, gaming has become the new religion. Each gamer devotes their time to the characters and worlds they feel most drawn to. Just like the eight million different gods worshipped in Shinto belief across Japan, gaming narratives are often complex, mutable, deep and morally ambiguous, just like legends and lore. Gaming culture is a lifestyle and a significant aspect of the wider "nerd" or "otaku" culture that developed during the latter half of the 20th century. It has its own unique language, its own idols, its own multiverses and stories and, just like most religions, it offers a safe sanctuary where people can connect and share their experiences.

The very nature of the video game medium allows for a far less passive form of storytelling, pushing creators to develop prolific and constantly evolving histories and lores in order for audiences to be immersed in the world, interacting and exploring with relatable characters and expansive landscapes for a highly customisable experience.

And the cult of gaming extends beyond the virtual world. Conventions have brought fans together in real life and give devotees the opportunity to hero-worship those involved with the creation of their favourite games. The Japanese-coined term cosplay (a blend of the words costume and play), first popular with anime and manga fans, has become a major part of gamer culture, especially amongst convention goers. This entails dressing up as a character, maintaining as much accuracy as possible - complete with props, full makeup and hair, and putting on a convincing performance to mimic the movements,

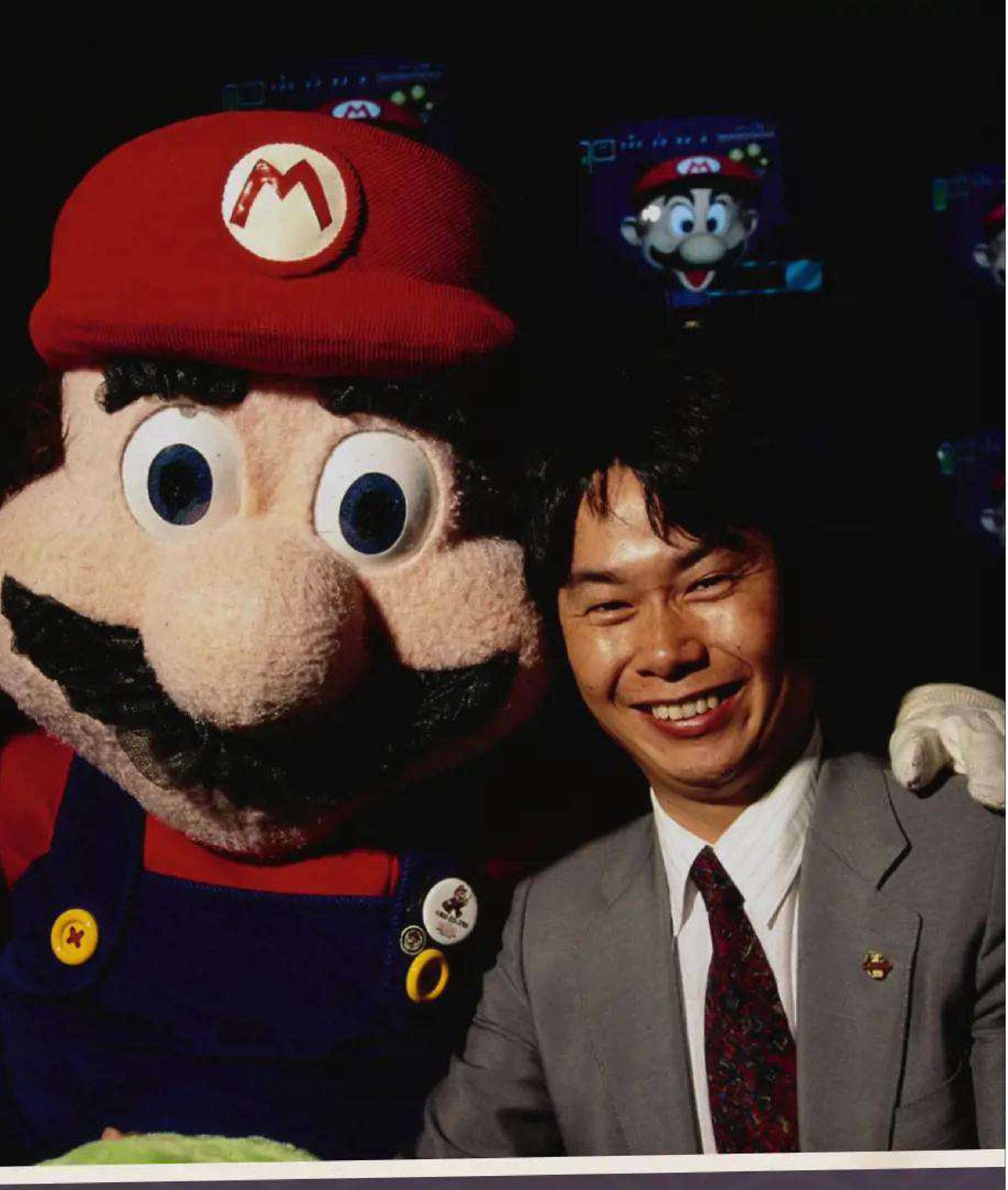


Shigeru Miyamoto, a pioneering figure in the globally envied Japanese gaming world

SONIC RUMBLE
出口
EXIT

Sega protagonists Sonic and Tails: not just cutesy game characters but the figureheads for a new culture

"MOST RECOGNISABLE JAPANESE MONSTERS COME FROM THE GAMING WORLD"

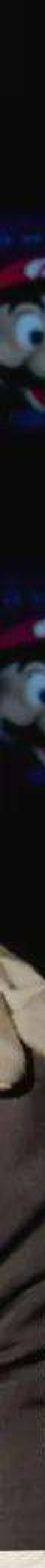


expressions and more. Many cosplayers create their own costumes and do a fantastic job acting as their chosen characters, leading them to have a following of their own.

GAMING GODS

And while, at one point, gaming culture was just some obscure cult, it's infiltrated the mainstream. In fact, the global gaming industry generates more annual revenue than both the film and music industries combined. It goes without saying then, that video games have been incredibly influential in shaping popular culture in the past few decades – and Japan is considered one of the most influential countries in the gaming industry. The country is home to many notable games companies, including market leader Sony, Nintendo, Sega and Capcom. While they might not have invented the medium, they have had an integral role in making video games what they are today. Released in 1978 and developed by Japanese company Taito, *Space Invaders* ushered in the Golden Age of Video Games and is still considered one of the greatest and most influential games of all time. The Japanese made significant waves when it came to gaming development and technological advances. The Nintendo Entertainment System (NES) game console helped popularise home gaming and Nintendo's Game Boy revolutionised handheld gaming.

Mario, the plucky lead character from Mario Bros, is nominally Italian – but the world he lives in is Japanese to its core



VIRTUAL MYTHOLOGY

A formidable force in terms of technology, Japan has also made its mark on the gaming industry with its innovations in game design and storytelling. The bold Japanese art styles found in anime and manga – derived from ukiyo-e traditional woodblock prints that often featured mythical characters, yōkai and yurei and the aesthetics of bunraku puppet theatre – made their way into video games. Thanks to Japanese developers' focus on deep storytelling, they pulled influence from folklore and mythology, integrating uniquely Japanese cultural elements into some of the nation's most popular exports. As a result, the country has created some of the most iconic video game franchises, full of instantly recognisable characters, creatures and monsters – such as *Super Mario Bros.*, *Final Fantasy*, *Street Fighter*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Sonic the Hedgehog* and *Pokémon* – many of which have become household names across the West. Arguably the most influential tales of modern Japan – at least in terms of their cultural impact and legacy outside of the country – are no longer the folklore fictions of the past, but these contemporary stories told through the interactive medium of video games. The most recognisable Japanese monsters aren't yōkai or yurei, they're plucked from the virtual gaming world. The stories that form the very fabric of the rich tapestry that makes up the country's modern national identity are pocket monsters like Pikachu and final bosses like Bowser. The tales of Mario saving Princess Peach and Link's fight to save the kingdom of Hyrule against the demon king can be seen as the country's most famous tales of heroism and good versus evil. And the country has become almost synonymous with gaming culture – Japanese culture is gamer culture. Arcade gaming remains immensely popular with Japanese youth and millions of people from all over the world flock to Akihabara – Tokyo's unique "Electric Town" – which is devoted to otaku (or "nerd") culture and features numerous specialised stories to satiate all of your video gaming needs. Universal Studios Japan in Osaka is home to Super Nintendo World – its immersive Nintendo experience proving to be one of the most popular attractions within the park.

FUELLED BY FOLKLORE

But why is it that gaming has become so integral to modern Japanese culture? The answer may lie in the country's deep-rooted and unwavering appreciation for the arts. Japanese art is very narrative-focused, visual artforms often expressing stories plucked from folklore and legend as well as symbols and themes related to Shinto and Buddhist belief. What's more, the Japanese have maintained a consistent connection to the legends of their ancient past through their largely unfaltering devotion to the Shinto faith and its beliefs and traditions. With such a strong connection to their national storytelling

ABOVE LEFT A Mario cos-player embraces the daddy of Japanese gaming

ABOVE MIDDLE Pokémon's ubiquity reached its peak with a Nippon Airways tie-in

ABOVE RIGHT The Gameboy was the must-have accessory for many a 1990s youngster

BELOW Crowds gather at the Super Nintendo World sub-world of Universal Studios Japan

heritage, Japanese mythology and Shinto concepts have made their way into the most influential video games of all time, where they have been reinvented and reinterpreted for a global audience. The likes of the samurai, ninja, kami, yōkai and the yurei have had a major influence on the characters and themes featured in many of the major video game franchises. And, as a result, Western audiences have had much more exposure to aspects of Japanese legend than they may realise. The influences of Japanese mythology and monsters are often hidden in plain sight – even within the stories of one stereotypically Italian plumber and the tale of a super-speedy American hedgehog, you will find distinctive elements and unsubtle nods to Japanese cultural heritage.

FANTASY FOLKLORE

Debuting its first installment in 1987, *Final Fantasy* has come to be celebrated as one of the most successful video game franchises of all time. The series incorporates many elements of Japanese mythology and folklore. For example, players can achieve the job classes of ninja and samurai, and the games' over-arching themes directly reference Japanese philosophies. *Final Fantasy's* narrative themes echo concepts such as wa (harmony) and mono no aware (the transient nature of life and the beauty found within impermanence). Players encounter magical creatures such as the kappa, the kirin and dragons (like Shinryū), as well as deities like Raijin (thunder god) and Shiva, who shares a name with a Hindu god but embodies the essence of the Japanese "snow witch" yōkai, the yuki-onna.

KOOPAS AND KAPPAS

Nintendo has probably done the most solid job of waving the flag for Japanese mythology within modern popular culture. The multiple universes of Nintendo are rich with folklore influence and mythical monsters and feature some of the most iconic characters to come out of Japan. Nintendo's O.G. mascot, Mario, on the surface seems utterly un-Japanese. An Italian plumber and his sidekick brother on a mission to save a distinctly Western-looking princess doesn't seem to have much influence from Japanese mythology. However, amongst some obvious nods to Norse, Greco-Romano and Germanic folklore, are plenty of Asian mythical influences. First appearing in the game *Mario Bros.*, the turtle-like species named Koopa are based on some of the most well-known yōkai in Japan – the kappa. Perhaps the most infamous of the Koopa, Bowser, is strikingly similar to its associated yōkai in terms of its temperament. Other koopas share

> "THE UNIVERSES OF NINTENDO ARE RICH WITH FOLKLORE INFLUENCE"

LEFT Super Mario Bros.' nemesis Bowser is a descendant of the water-dwelling kappa

BELOW The Game Boy's graphics may have been basic but they were rich with cultural impact

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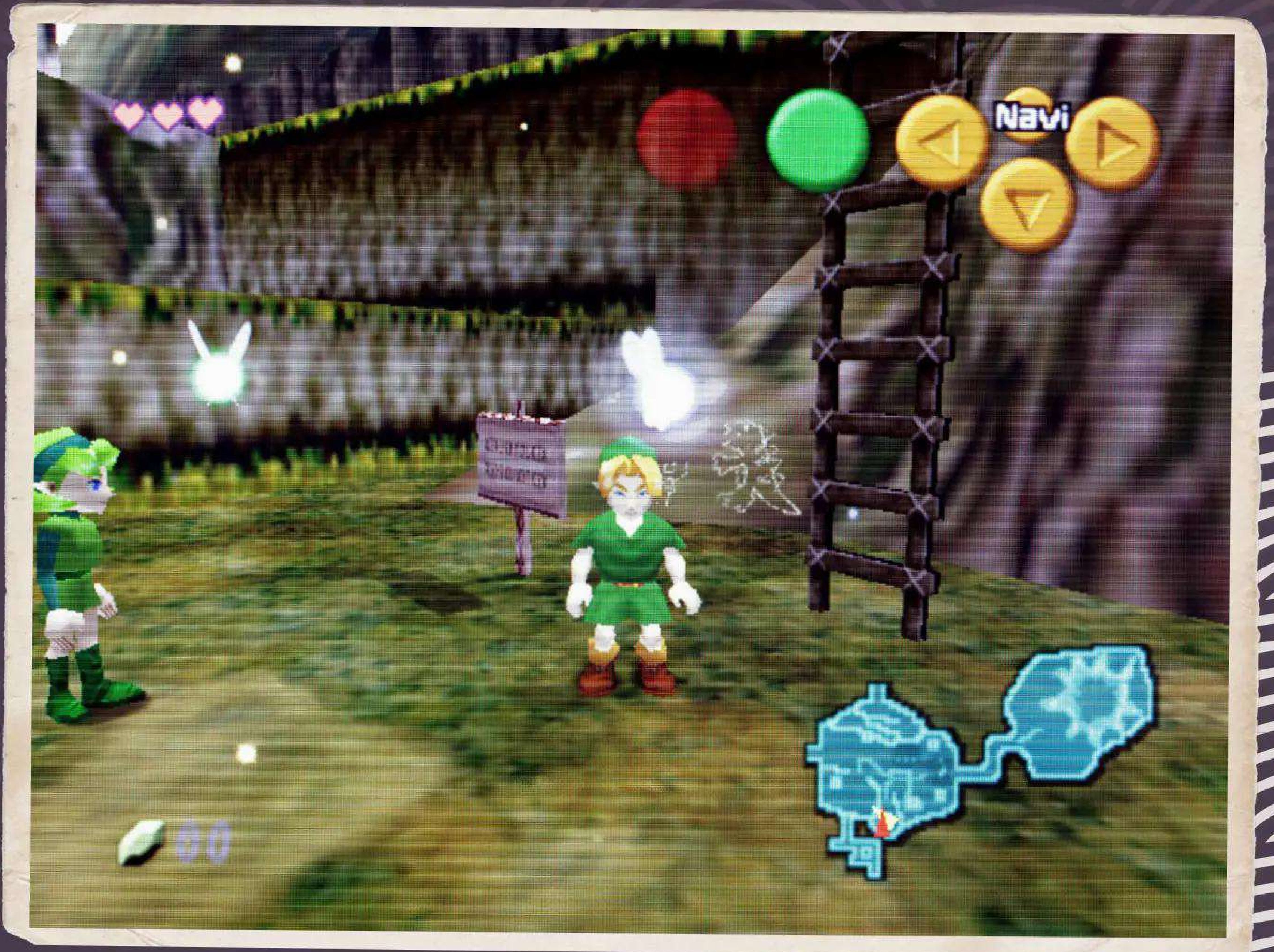
B
A
SELECT
START

similarities with other yōkai, for example, the magikoopa Kamek and the cloud-riding Lakitu also resemble the tengu.

And it's not just the koopa that takes its inspiration from a form of yōkai; mushroom kingdom is a whole world of inanimate objects that come to life, just like the tsukumogami. It's full of human-faced kami-type beings like the mushroom-headed Toad and stars and even bombs that have faces.

A LINK TO THE PAST

Another of Nintendo's most famous franchises is *The Legend of Zelda*. On its surface this fairytale adventure game appears to take most of its cues from Western folklore and fantasy fiction such as *Lord of the Rings* and *Peter Pan*. However, its essence is firmly

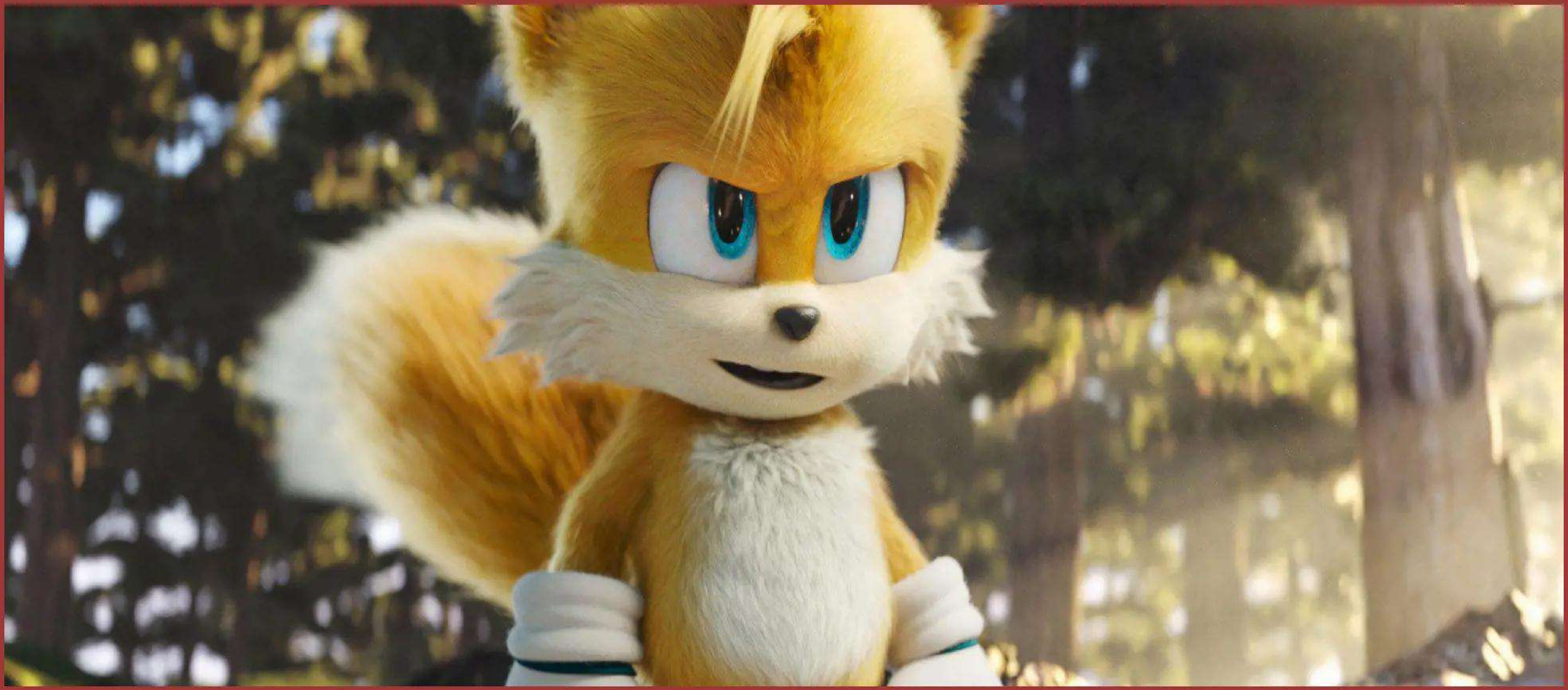


Nintendo's Zelda encompassed themes that encapsulated Japanese conceptions of nature

LEGENDARY TAILS

HOW JAPANESE FOLKLORE SHAPED SEGA'S MOST INFLUENTIAL EXPORTS

Game developer Sega used the mythology associated with Japanese ninjas (see page 98) to create one of their most commercially successful arcade games of the 1980s – *Shinobi*. But ninjas, or shinobi, were already a tried and tested folkloric antihero that proved popular with Western audience, thanks largely to cinema provoking increased interest in Eastern philosophies and martial arts during the 1970s. However, it wasn't until it released the Mega Drive (also known as Sega Genesis) in 1988 that the company really made its mark on mainstream media. It was upon the release of this console that they introduced us to a character that would prove to be one of the best-selling video game franchises of all time, *Sonic the Hedgehog*. Designed by Yuji Naka, Naoto Ohshima and Hirokazu Yasuhara, Sonic became the company's mascot in 1991. Despite him being heavily influenced by American culture, his faithful sidekick, Tails, is actually a not-so-subtle reference to the kitsune of Japanese mythology, catapulting an ancient and iconic yōkai to the centre of the international stage.



Sega's Tails has an arguably unlikely intellectual folk symbolism in his kitsune genealogy

THE LEGEND OF
ZELDA
OCARINA OF TIME
Nintendo
POWER
RESET
NINTENDO 64

The Nintendo 64 represented new heights of escapist adventure – and Zelda was their fearless tour guide

> "THE ANIMISTIC SHINTO-INSPIRED WORLD OF ZELDA IS FILLED WITH ELEMENTAL FORCES"

planted within the fertile soils of Japan and the Shinto faith. Creator Shigeru Miyamoto was inspired to create the game thanks to his love of the natural world and the adventures and explorations he had as a boy in the surrounding countryside of his childhood home. The Zelda franchise embodies the Shinto religion and pays respect to its Japanese cultural heritage by echoing the ideas of embracing flaws, redemption and wisdom, the thematic reverence for nature and incorporating the sword fighting style of chanbara, used by samurai.

The series is set within a world known as Hyrule, created by three goddesses (who echo the Shinto creational gods). The first deity to be born into this world is Hylia, who shares many characteristics with the principle Shinto kami, Amaterasu. *Zelda* is a mortal reincarnation of Hylia, just like the emperors of Imperial Japan were said to be directly descended from Amaterasu. Hylia is a goddess of light, while Amaterasu is a sun deity. The animistic Shinto-inspired world of *Zelda* is also filled with the elemental forces of the kami and yōkai. The keaton of Majora's Mask is essentially a kitsune, tsukumogami can also be seen throughout the franchise and include the Master Sword (swords are a very common form of tsukumogami in Shinto belief) and the human-faced Great Deku Tree seen in the 1998 game *The Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time* is an interpretation of a jinmenju. The reoccuring skeletal soldiers found in dungeons and tombs, known as Stalfos, can be seen to represent the giant starving skeleton spirits found in Japanese folklore, the gashadokuro, while the Hinoxes have a similar build and fashion sense to oni. Wolfos are strikingly similar to the okuri-inu of Japanese lore.

GOTTA CATCH 'EM ALL

In 1996 Nintendo introduced the world to a multitude of fictitious creatures that would prove iconic. The creatures, known as *Pokémon* (a combination of the English words "pocket" and "monsters"), are shaped by the Japanese yōkai and take inspiration from both real-life animals and mythical beasts, possess supernatural abilities, including the ability to shapeshift or "evolve", and each belong to a different type or category, that reflect natural, elemental forces or spiritual aspects. Inspired

Charmander
CP ???

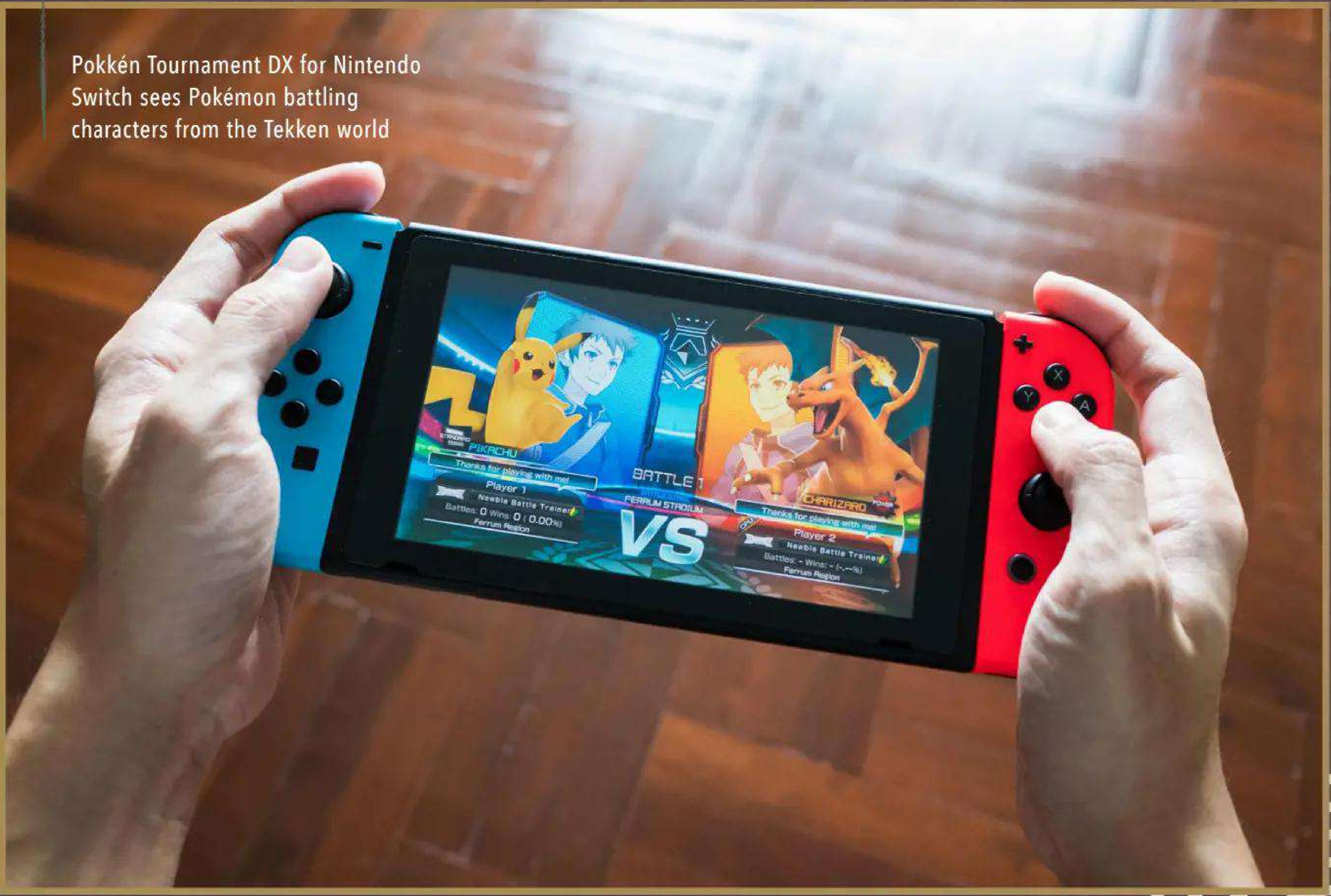
The smash hit *Pokémon Go* introduced a new generation to the joys of its monster-filled landscape

by creator Satoshi Tajiri's explorations in nature searching for bugs, tadpoles and other critters, and the themes of *Pokémon* reflect the Shinto animistic belief of living in harmony with nature, through its overarching message of achieving a peaceful coexistence between humans and Pokémon.

Some Pokémon are directly associated with a Japanese yōkai, such as Ninetails who is a kitsune, Meowth who resembles the maneki-neko, Drowzee who is a baku and Exeggutor, a jinmenju. Others are reminiscent of kaiju or mythological creatures found in other cultures' folklore. *Pokémon* became a global phenomenon, catapulting these new versions of traditional Japanese folkloric spirits into mainstream global consciousness and spawning trading card games, an animated series, videogames and endless merchandise. And, even though the initial *Poké*mania died out by 2002, its legacy wouldn't.

In 2016, the world was reintroduced to Pikachu and co as the pocket monsters infiltrated our real world through the innovative mobile game *Pokémon Go*. The game became an overnight hit, reaching over 130 million downloads in its first month and grossing $100 million in just 20 days. And the game brought *Pokémon* full circle. These creatures, inspired by real world folkloric beliefs, were reintroduced into the landscape – players were able to see their favourite pocket monsters through their camera lens. Pokémon, just like yōkai, could lurk unseen around any corner, down any street, and you could even bump into one on your weekly grocery shop. The *Pokémon Go* app is like holding a magical tool in the palm of your hand, allowing you to peer into the spirit world directly.

There's no doubt that video games have helped Japanese culture and the influence of its long, rich history of storytelling myths and curious monsters to infiltrate global pop culture consciousness. As we move towards a new globalised generation enriched by numerous nationalities' cultures, Japan has shared an incredible array of its unique folkloric elements – from cute, human-faced food to nine-tailed foxes and irritable, anthropomorphic turtles. And if it wasn't for the nation's powerful influence within the video game industry, we might very well have missed out on them all.



Pokkén Tournament DX for Nintendo Switch sees Pokémon battling characters from the Tekken world

The sheer number of Pokémon is only dwarfed by the expansiveness of its folklore origins

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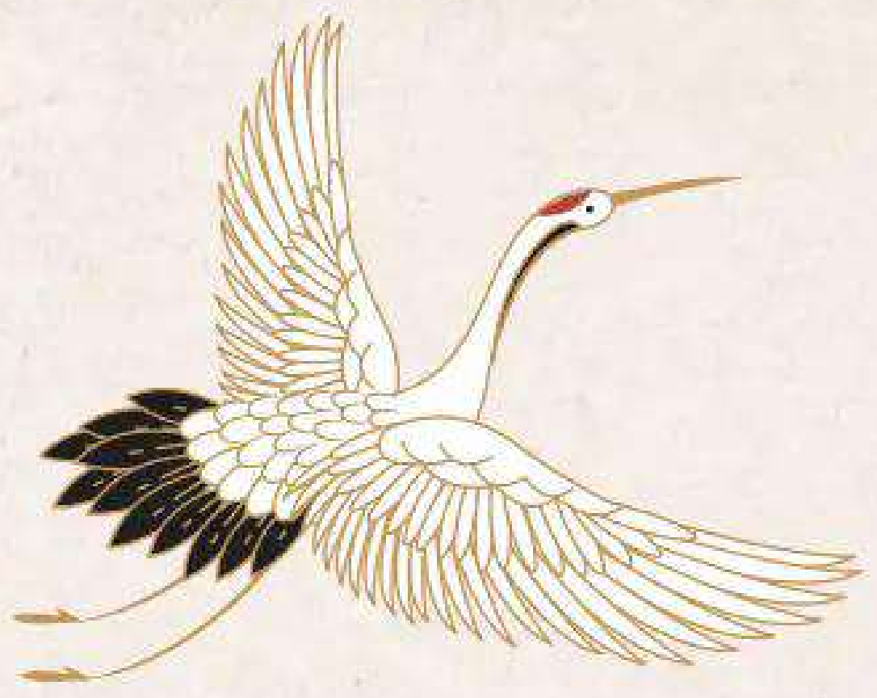

JAPANESE
MYTHS & MONSTERS

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DISCOVER THE CURIOUS CRITTERS
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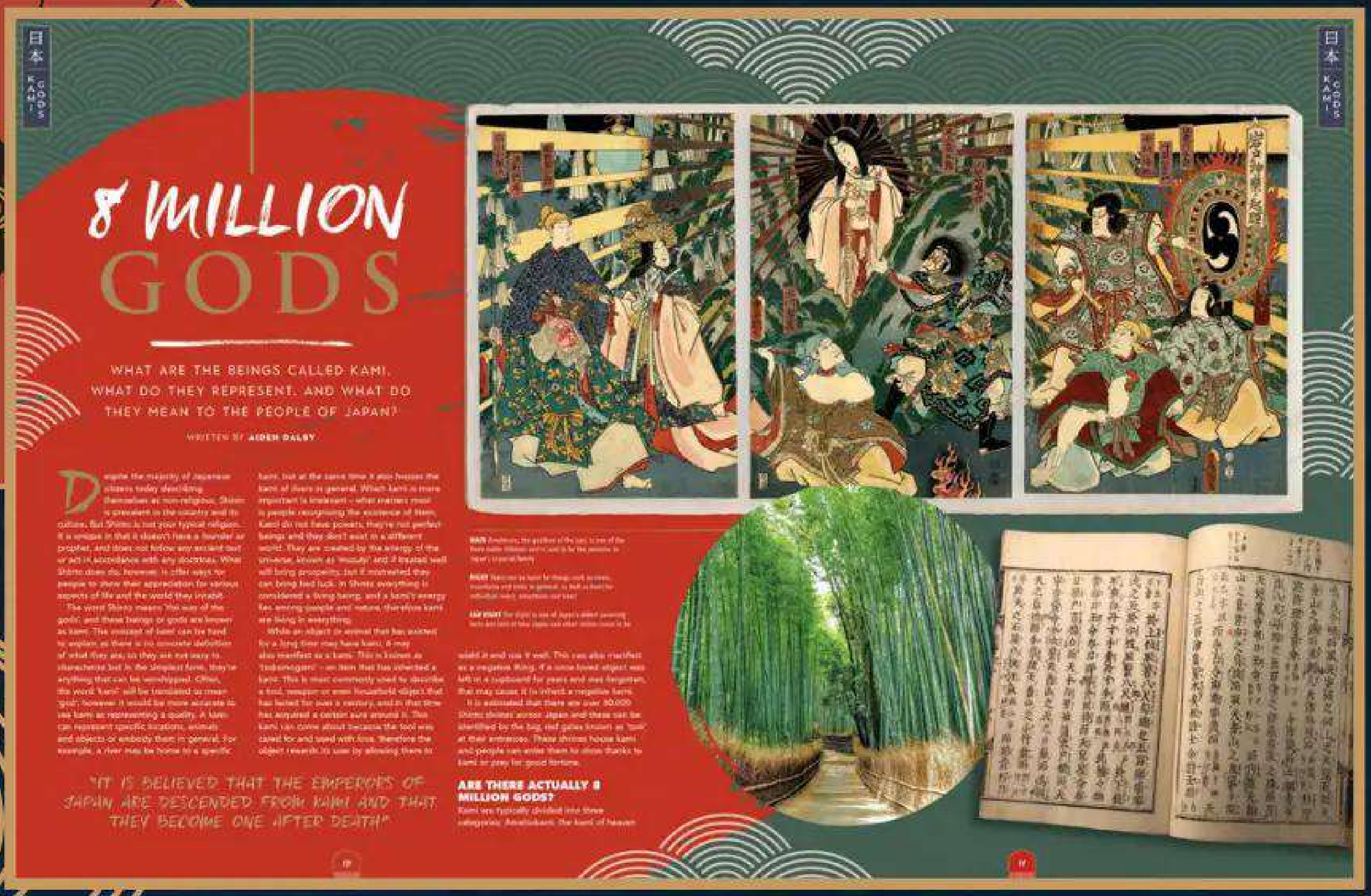
8 MILLION
GODS
WHAT ARE THE BEINGS CALLED KAMI, WHAT DO THEY REPRESENT, AND WHAT DO THEY MEAN TO THE PEOPLE OF JAPAN?

COUNTLESS KAMI

Delve into the Shinto pantheon of
endless mystical deities

THE
YŌKAI
THE YŌKAI ARE A GROUP OF SUPERNATURAL ENTITIES INCLUDING DEMONS, SPIRITS, BEASTS AND MORE. NEITHER INHERENTLY GOOD NOR EVIL, THEY HOLD A KEY PLACE IN FOLKLORE
"THESE SPIRITS WERE OFTEN BLAMED FOR UNLUCKY PHENOMENA"

STRANGE CREATURES

Demons? Mythical beasts? What are the
mysterious yōkai of folklore?

YŪREI
SPIRITS OF
THE DEAD
THE YŪREI ARE NOT JUST GHOSTS DRIFTING THROUGH THE WORLD. THEY'RE GHOSTS WHO NEED OUR HELP — AND YOU'D BETTER GIVE YOURS, IF YOU CAN
"SURPRISINGLY, YŪREI WERE ORIGINALLY BENEVOLENT GHOSTS"

GHASTLY GHOULS

Learn about the ghostly supernatural
entities that haunt the nation

MYTHS AND
MONSTERS:
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